BLUE STEEL 3

BLASPHEMER

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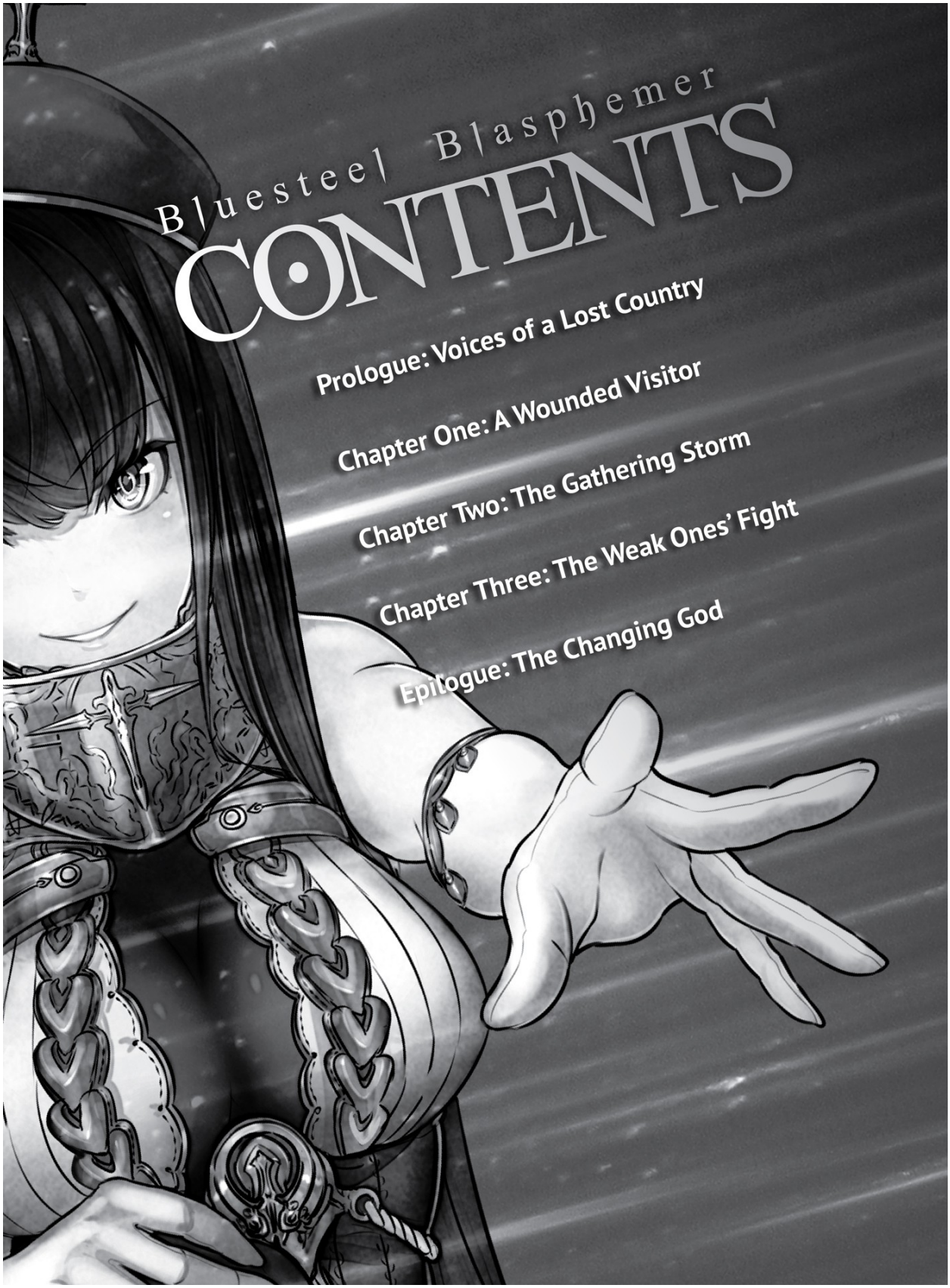
"only I... can do..."
She could see the missionaries, beyond the statue of the guardian saint. She could see the man playing the organ, too. But the massive statue out front sometimes blocked her line of fire.
"What..."
Would she do it? Could she do it? She felt her stomach knot tighter as she asked herself these questions.
This was the first job Yukinari had ever given her. The first object, Derrringer, he had ever given her.
Now she could hit him. She was sure of it. Just where she wanted. She stopped breathing. She stopped feeling.
And then she pulled the trigger.

Angela Jindel
Eldest daughter of Count Jindel and vice-captain of Bateson's unit. Joined the Missionary Order of her own accord and volunteered for a civilizing expedition to the frontier.
"You decided to fight me when this was the best you could do?"
"Hrrgh–!"
Smiling, Angela struck out with her sword again and again. Normally, in a battle of halberd versus sword, the person with the longer reach would have the advantage. But Angela's movements were nimble and quick, and she was deliberately getting close to Veronika, pushing her back.
Veronika
A female mercenary who drifted into Friedland. Somehow strangely refined for a mercenary. And she seems to have some history with the Harris Church…



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Prologue: Voices of a Lost Country

In stark contrast to the fervor of battle that raged outside, the room was filled with a cold tension. The room was large, but made only of rough stone.

It was customary, in this place where the council of war met, to have no frivolous ornaments. There was a large, round table in the center of the room, surrounded by about twenty chairs. There was a stand for candles, and on the wall, a banner boasting a crest—this alone made of colorful threads. It was the only decoration permitted in the room, meant to stoke the lust for battle. But now… now it weighed heavily on the chamber.

A single official, three female warriors, and three knights were in the council room.

They seemed so few against the largeness of the space. And so the frozen silence was heavier to them, taunted them the more. No one had told them not to speak, but they sat listening to the sounds that came clearly from outside.

Swords ringing off each other. Shouting voices. The stomp of soldiers' boots. And all of them together—the sound of battle. A deep rumble like thunder could be heard from time to time, perhaps a battering ram. The noise was faint, but unmistakably growing closer. Close enough that it could be heard in the council room, situated deep within the castle.

Someone looked up and called out, "His Majesty!" It must have been the familiar approaching footsteps.

A second later, the thick door to the room was flung open, and those gathered sighed to see the heroic figure who stood there.

"Your Royal Majesty!"

The man who approached the table, all eyes watching him, was middle-aged, wearing a set of intricately worked armor and a deep crimson mantle. He was in the prime of his life both physically and mentally, but he radiated something more than simple maturity. He was both a warrior and a king. The way he walked revealed as much.

"You must pardon me. I was delayed preparing for the field." He took the helmet he held under his arm and set it on the table, and then the man—the king—looked at each person in the council room. "Is all well here?" he asked, holding up a hand to forestall those who would have fallen prostrate before him.

Everyone nodded. But the fact that the king himself was here in this place, deep in the castle, asking that question—it meant all too clearly that things had already gotten very bad. An avalanche of enemy soldiers might pour into the room at any moment.

"Veronika, you understand what's going on?"

The woman he had spoken to gave a half-nod. This young woman was more than a lady of the court. For some reason, she was wearing the plain

garments of a government official, nothing like what members of the royal family wore, but her symmetrical face and red hair, among other things, gave her a clear resemblance to the king. It was obvious at a glance that they were related.

"Sire. The Scanlan barbarians have perpetrated a despicable surprise attack against the capital, and—"

"The enemy is already a stone's throw away," the king said, speaking over the girl—the princess. It was a simple fact, but the weight of it was immense. "This is no time to hold back our strength. I will go with the army."

Consternation broke out in the council chamber. The declaration was tragic: if the king himself was going to wield a sword and fight, it was as good as saying that all was lost.

But a faint glimmer of hope remained on the faces of those gathered for the council of war. Garett Wolfenden, the king of this nation, was a living legend. He was of the royal family, born to power. He had used that power, and his family's wealth, to secure peace, and no one would have blamed him if he had gone on to live a life of indolence. But Garrett was not content to do such a thing; he saw himself as a man of arms before he was a king, and he trained as such.

Even while the prior king was still on the throne, Garrett had dealt proactively with border disputes and unrest on the frontiers, and he was among the many soldiers who had seen battle on the front lines. Thus he had sharpened his innate talent against the whetstone of experience and gained a reputation as a royal who was also a superlative person. His fame spread to the surrounding nations, and it became known far and wide that Wolfenden was a prince-at-arms.

He took the throne, married, and had a child. His life was settled: he was a fine husband and father, and a good king who governed wisely. But he never forgot that he was a warrior, and many of the king's servants had witnessed him at practice, swinging his sword in the garden as dawn broke.

"Father!" Veronika said forcefully. "Then I shall accompany you! Uncle, bring my armor and sword!"

Veronika Wolfenden. *Like father, like daughter*, the servants were fond of whispering with rueful smiles. His blood very much ran in her veins. In hopes of growing even a little closer to the father she adored, Veronika had learned how to fight despite being a woman, and at about the age of twelve she was already skilled enough to take on the average soldier in a fair fight. Her mother had died when Veronika was young, leaving Garrett her only family and the person she loved most in the world. She was more than just his blood; in her ardent pursuit of the martial arts, she was the daughter of Garrett Wolfenden in all that she said and did.

The king's retainers adored this outgoing princess almost as much as the king himself did.

Now, Garrett asked quietly, "Veronika, how old are you?"

Thrown off by the unexpected question, she answered, “Huh? I... I’m fifteen. More than old enough to join my first battle!”

A small smile flitted over Garrett’s face as he looked at the wall of the room—the wall where the national banner hung.

“Clail, Troutman. Take care of my daughter. Pick several men from the royal guard.”

“Your Majesty...?”

As they realized the import of these words, the faces of the two knights, as well as Veronika, paled.

“F-Father! I’m confident in my abilities! There’s no one in this castle who can best me aside from you. Be it with spear or sword, no one can—”

“No. This is not your battlefield. Today, you must run.”

Garrett spoke, and that settled the matter. Veronika was lost for words. Her father, her king, had told her to run. That could only mean he expected to lose this battle.

But Veronika couldn’t imagine how that could be. Her father would be joining the fight. Her father, the legend, one man who could face down a thousand, would be at the front, and then those barbarians would be dispersed in the blink of an eye. Veronika was convinced of this; she had no doubt.

“...Princess, this way,” said an elderly knight who attended her.

“Uncle?!” In shock, Veronika turned to her uncle, the one-eyed knight Hugo Troutman. He was a soldier who, when he was young, had served on the battlefield with her father. Garrett trusted him implicitly. He had lost his eye to an arrow, after which he had been put on the back lines as Veronika’s guardian. Much of the fighting arts on which she prided herself, she had learned from her father—but the rest she had learned from Hugo.

And now he, too—even he—believed they would lose this fight.

“I’m counting on you, Troutman,” Garrett said, and then turned away.

Veronika tried to say something, to call out to her father’s back—but the words wouldn’t come. His shoulders, his back, steadfastly refused to let his daughter follow. She understood this all too clearly, because for as long as she could remember, all she had done was chase after that figure.

“Father—!”

“Princess...” The aged knight took Veronika’s hand; all she could do was watch as her father vanished from view.

●

The escape road led them out of the castle, depositing them on a tree-covered mountain nearby. They were at a diagonal from the castle, able to look down on it. The place admitted no horses, and footing was poor; it was bad terrain for an army, which made it less likely that an enemy would attempt an ambush from this direction. The chances of them accidentally running into a hostile force seemed slim.

Making it this far was something of a relief. Hugo must have thought as much, because he called a brief rest. Many places along the escape route

required them to crawl, so Veronika and the knights protecting her were all tired.

“Father…!”

Even so, she tried desperately to find a view of the castle, to see how the battle was going. And indeed, catching glimpses through the trees, she was able to see what had become of her former home.

Veronika caught her breath, speechless.

The castle was surrounded by an army far larger than she had expected. The force seemed to grow even as it pressed closer, and of course it had no hesitation about destroying anything within reach.

They were like a flood. Soldiers crawled over the castle, swallowing it up. The garden her mother had cherished, the grounds where her father had trained, all trampled beneath the soldiers’ feet. Once they withdrew, it seemed likely there would be nothing left. Everything would be crushed.

The defenders were putting up the fiercest fight they could manage, but the attackers were obviously more powerful. And they were aided by reinforcements after reinforcements. Slowly but surely, they pushed the defensive line back to the castle itself.

“Father…!”

A group of soldiers exploded from the ranks of the defenders. It was the royal guard sallying fourth, led by her father the king. All the men of the guard were almost as skilled in combat as Garrett. They stood before the massive army without fear, easily dispatching the enemy foot soldiers.

“Ah…”

The Wolfenden forces had been on the brink of collapse, but now they were surging back to life; even at this distance, Veronika could feel it. Their warrior-king, their living legend, was on the front line with his picked troops. His valor and skill were every bit as great as the legends proclaimed.

He was beyond striking down a foe with every move: each time Garrett swung his spear, two or three heads would fly into the air. True, perhaps the element of surprise gave him some advantage, but in the blink of an eye, he had brought down more than ten enemy soldiers, and then the king and his royal guard were pressing deeper into the opposing ranks.

His reinvigorated soldiers followed behind him, carving a swath through the army surrounding the castle. The enemy formation was disrupted; as terror and confusion made them attempt to flee from Garrett’s advance, some even fell down, catching their allies as they tumbled. They looked pathetic.

To think that one man should be so powerful. It was a true miracle. A true legend.

Garrett Wolfenden had single-handedly turned the tide of battle.

But then…

“Oh—!” Veronika couldn’t restrain an exclamation.

Ruin came first not to Garrett, but to the royal guard holding his flank. They may have been chosen men, but they were still human. However strong the charisma exerted by their leader, their strength could only last so long.

And Garrett—Garrett was too strong.

He toppled one enemy after another, without fear, without hesitation, but as a result, he and his guard found themselves too deep behind the enemy line. The royal guard had stretched into a long column with the king at its head, and as it sustained attacks from the side, one guard fell, and then another, until they were surrounded.

Dozens upon dozens of the enemy pressed in all around them. Spears reached out like the jaws of an animal ready to consume its prey, harassing the isolated Garrett and his guards.

But Garrett didn't withdraw. At this point, he couldn't.

He continued to fight, shouting encouragement to his troops. But his guards fell one after another. Each one of them killed many of the enemy, but opposing troops would soon fill any void; there seemed to be an endless number of them.

Death was everywhere. Corpses were piled on top of each other: friend, foe, it didn't matter. Sometimes the wounded were trampled and killed; there was nowhere to step.

The essence of the martial arts is being able to use your feet effectively. Without that, one is hardly half the fighter one would otherwise be. And Garrett and the others were obviously flagging.

Then, Garrett's spear broke.

"Father…!" Veronika's voice was nearly a scream.

Immediately, Garrett drew his sword and resumed the battle. But his defeat, and that of his army, now looked inevitable.

The great horde of the enemy killed insatiably. Even Garrett's sword, forged by a master, soon broke. The king's movements were growing visibly sluggish. The warrior-king, the living legend—such titles didn't change the fact that he was just one person.

Veronika uttered a voiceless scream as, finally, a spear found a chink in Garrett's armor and pierced him.

The king could never have been defeated one-on-one. The person who landed the blow was just an ordinary foot soldier. But the sheer violence of numbers would overwhelm even a hero. One master swordsman with a legendary blade could be outdone by a mob with slingshots. It was a truth that the scene before Veronika's eyes made all too plain.

That first stab opened a window of opportunity, and ten more spears reached out for the king. Of the guards who should have protected him, there were none left.

Garrett fell to his knees, and more enemy soldiers took the opportunity to stab him. They surrounded him on all sides, flocked to him like crows to a corpse. He had already stopped moving, but his body refused to fall over,

and soldiers continued to stab at him as though they couldn’t be sure he was dead.

“F-Faaatheerrrrr!” Veronika’s despairing yell couldn’t be heard over the din of the battlefield.

There were so many of them. So many of them. However strong he was, one man was helpless against such numbers.

That was something Veronika Wolfenden learned at the age of fifteen, a lesson she was taught without pity and without mercy.

Chapter One: A Wounded Visitor

Yukinari felt bright sunlight seeping in past his eyelids. He registered the arrival of morning as he drifted up from the unconsciousness of sleep.

He didn't say anything, but blinked twice.

The sunlight seemed different, somehow, from usual. Perhaps he was imagining it? He had never been awoken by the morning light like this. He had been living in his "sanctuary" for months—maybe the changing seasons gave a new quality to the light.

"Hm…?" Yukinari sat up and scratched his head.

He took a deep breath. The air was cold and damp; it was probably still very early in the morning. It was already bright outside, but he had the impression it was a bit earlier than he usually got up. He swallowed the yawn that welled up in him and got out of bed. He looked back toward the window the light was pouring through—and froze.

A girl was standing there. Ten years old, or maybe a little older—or anyway, so she looked. She was facing away from him, so he couldn't see her face, but her body made it clear that she was still growing; she gave a distinctly childish impression. She didn't even appear yet to have secondary sexual characteristics.

"Ulrike?" Yukinari muttered, furrowing his eyebrows.

Even from behind, there was no mistaking her. She was the only one in the sanctuary who looked so young. Not to mention, no one else there had the strangely shaped "horns"—like the horns of a stag, or perhaps the branches of a tree—that she did.

The horns were in odd shapes, but they had a certain symmetry; once you were used to them, they didn't look bad.

All that was well and good, but…

"What are you doing?"

"Mm? Yukinari, you're up?"

The girl Ulrike turned her head, her long, flowing hair following. It was a rich green like a budding leaf. Her hair and her horns made it clear that the girl was not entirely human, but even so, these were her only unusual features; from the neck down, she looked like a perfectly normal person.

That only made this situation all the worse.

"I am absorbing energy from the sunlight," she said, giving him a quizzical tilt of her cherubic face.

"Absorbing energy? What, you mean like a plant?"

"I am a plant."

"…Oh yeah." Yukinari let out a bit of a sigh.

Ulrike was not human, as she appeared. Or to be more precise, she was no longer human. She had once been a typical village girl, but the human Ulrike had died long ago.

When she spoke to Yukinari, the words and actions of the “original” Ulrike were placed front and center, but the thoughts behind them belonged to Yggdra. Who was leading and who was following was not always immediately apparent, and Yukinari sometimes wasn’t sure how he felt about that. It was obvious, though, that this girl didn’t always think of things the way a normal person might expect.

Part of the problem was that the erdgod Yggdra had developed out of a plant, an organism whose way of being was so different from that of a human that the deity used her familiars as intermediaries when attempting to communicate with people. But whatever the outward expression, the thinking behind the familiars’ words and actions was ultimately influenced by Yggdra, which meant Yukinari sometimes found her just tangent to what he would think of as sanity.

Say, for example, sunbathing, naked as a jaybird, in front of the window.

“Plants gain energy from light and water. I am myself a part of Yggdra, you will recall. Thus I am here to absorb light.”

Ulrike explained all this, not showing a hint of embarrassment even though her still-developing, totally naked body was in full view of Yukinari. Across her pale skin ran a web of green lines, much like the veins in a leaf. Perhaps her body ran not with blood, but with chlorophyll-laden sap.

Whatever the case, it was clear that the plant cells in Ulrike’s body were energized by this act of photosynthesis, of exposing the green veins to the light.

“I get the logic, but put on some clothes,” Yukinari said.

“Hrm? Why?” She offered another curious tilt of her chin like a bird, the very picture of innocence. She didn’t appear to have the slightest hesitation or qualm about being buck-naked in front of Yukinari.

That’s a plant for you, I guess...

Plants feel no embarrassment at having no clothes on, so maybe it was only natural Ulrike wouldn’t, either. But as we’ve said, from the neck down —her green veins excepted—her body was very much that of an immature girl. It was understandable if Yukinari had some doubts about being exposed to this.

“This just... isn’t good. In a whole bunch of ways.”

“Not good? What isn’t?”

“Well, I mean—”

He was just trying to figure out how to explain when...

“Lord Yukinari, good morn—”

Another girl appeared in the still-open door to his room.

She looked to be in her late teens. She wasn't large; this she shared with Ulrike, but she already had the fullness of a woman. This was especially evident in her chest, whose generousness was obvious even with her clothes on.

Her flaxen hair was tied into braids. She looked gentle and sweet—her features were not firm, and she gave a strong overall impression of simpleness, but she was nonetheless unmistakably beautiful.

Berta Wohmann.

She was a shrine maiden offered up to the master of this sanctuary—that is, the "god" Yukinari. Yukinari himself found this somewhat awkward, but no one around him, including Berta, had any objection, so she served at his side without any doubts or questions.

"Lord Yukinari..." She was standing stock-still with both hands over her mouth, as if to suppress a sound of surprise. Well, she had come to say good morning, and had found her master's room occupied by a stark-naked girl. A little shock was only to be expected.

"Right..." Yukinari said with a half-sigh. "Berta, about this... It's Ulrike's, uh, morning custom."

"Lord Yukinari," Berta said, blinking her wide eyes. "If you would call me, I would come morning or night to—"

"Okay, that's enough. You're only going to make things worse." He frowned. Berta had clearly misunderstood the situation.

Berta was originally supposed to be offered up to an erdgod who ate people, and Yukinari had saved her. But she had been raised nearly since birth as a shrine maiden, so part of her saw "offering herself up" as her whole reason for existence.

By felling the previous erdgod, Yukinari had become the new one, and it might have been easier on Berta emotionally if she were allowed to give herself to him. But Yukinari, of course, didn't eat people, and so Berta was left with only one other way to give him her body. This was not out of any genuine sexual desire but because of the duty she felt toward him, and it could make handling her very difficult.

Then...

"……Yuki."

Someone else appeared in the doorway behind Berta. Another young woman. He didn't know when she had gotten there. She was physically smaller than Berta, with a willowy body, so perhaps he simply hadn't seen her.

She had close-cropped silver hair, blue eyes, and white skin as smooth as porcelain. Each of these features was unusual and contributed to her nearly supernatural beauty. If she stood silently, it would almost be possible to take her for an intricately wrought doll.

Her name was Dasa Urban. She was Yukinari's companion, the younger sister of the person to whom he owed his life, and a master of studying this world. "Complicated" would be too generous a word for their relationship.

"What are... you doing?"

"I'm not doing anything," Yukinari insisted, but Dasa looked deeply suspicious. "I went to sleep, and then I woke up!"

"With Ulrike?"

"By myself!" Yukinari shouted.

But Dasa only looked more dubious; she had pulled her beloved weapon "Red Chili" from somewhere and had the loading gate open, checking to see if it had bullets in it. Dasa would never actually shoot at Yukinari, but—how do I put this?—the insinuation was unsettling enough.

"Yuki... You womanizer."

"I keep trying to tell you, I'm not—ahh, never mind. I'm not gonna argue. Just put your gun away."

"I'm told sunlight is quite healthful for animals, as well. Would you like to join me, Yukinari?"

Yukinari practically shouted at the still-naked girl, "That's enough out of you—and put your clothes on!"

●

Friedland was a small town nestled among the mountains. Because of its distance from the capital, the central government had comparatively little influence, and administration was mostly left to the locals.

Along the frontier, towns and villages like this weren't uncommon. Many had independent administrative structures—their customs and cultures were profuse, but this wasn't because colonists were sent out to settle new areas. Rather, small nations that had arisen naturally on the frontier were absorbed wholesale into the capital's territory. The roads were fairly well-traveled, but they were primarily for connecting the capital to the cities of the interior; the small settlements on the frontier rarely made use of them.

One reason for this was the erdgod cults that could be observed in many of the more remote areas.

Erdgods: living organisms that had obtained a massive amount of spiritual power. To be more precise, a xenobeast or demigod formed a spiritual bond with the land and became able to influence the environment of a certain area. Once it reached that point, it was called an erdgod. In many cases, the people who lived in these otherwise hostile areas formed a pact with the erdgod in order to ensure a measure of abundance. It gave them a little bit of stability on which to build their lives.

These were the erdgod cults.

But all things have a price. No erdgod was fool enough to give abundance to and protect a town from natural disaster without getting anything in return.

Often, what the deity demanded was human sacrifices.

The erdgod arose by forming a spiritual bond with the land, but gradually its intellect and sense of self dissipated until it becomes one with the land it ruled. In order to prevent this, it needed to shore up its own intelligence and selfhood by ingesting creatures with great spiritual power—meaning other gods, or at least humans.

Hundreds or thousands of people might die in a disaster or famine. To give up one person every few years in order to ward off such catastrophes seemed cheap at the price—at least to most people.

It was no different in Friedland. Except for one thing.

Just as the erdgod was about to eat the "shrine maiden" that was being offered to it, a young traveler happened to observe the ritual—a boy named Yukinari Amano. And he killed the erdgod.

As the term "god" implies, killing one of these creatures is not something the average person can do. Even myth and legend contained no stories of a single man bringing down an erdgod. Gods are gods precisely because they have surpassed and rule over even humans, who are the most spiritually powerful of all creatures.

As a result, Yukinari was hailed as Friedland's new erdgod.

Generally, when a town was left without an erdgod, a demigod came along and tried to fill the vacancy. Becoming an erdgod meant ruling over humans as a deathless master, and to demigods—that is, beasts who had not yet become full gods—that was a very attractive proposition.

It would have been very bad for Friedland, however, if the new god were more evil than the last. It might demand vastly more sacrifices or kill and eat people for sport—in other words, many more people might die.

What was more, if several demigods were to fight over the vacant rulership, their battle could cause severe damage to the town. Not least because the quickest way for a demigod to get stronger was for it to eat a lot of people.

The people of Friedland held Yukinari responsible for preventing all of this. By celebrating him as their new god and proclaiming that their land was his territory, they hoped to discourage demigods from attacking or fighting in the area.

Now, Yukinari was walking back along the road that connected Friedland to his "sanctuary." He glanced at the little stream that ran alongside.

It was a brand-new stream. The fact that the area still lacked much plant life and that there were no fish in the stream despite the beautiful water attested to its man-made origins—as did the way it ran in a perfectly straight line.

As it approached the town, the river split into smaller branches, carrying water to nearby fields. The ridges in the fields showed that they, too, had only recently been made. The earth was all freshly tilled. Small buds, yet to sprout, soaked up the sun.

"Everything's going well… I guess," Yukinari murmured.

He had become Friedland's erdgod at the people's insistence, but all these changes were only outward; he didn't have the connection to the earth, the ability to control the environment, that a real erdgod would have. Perhaps he could have gained it if he had known how, but an unending life that eventually saw him lose himself as he merged with the land was completely unappealing to him.

Neither, however, could Friedland hope for its harvests to remain stable if nothing was done. In the worst-case scenario, a mass famine was a distinct possibility. But even if it didn't come to that, without the erdgod, the soil would grow less rich. To counter this problem, Yukinari had drawn on his knowledge to create an efficient system of agriculture.

Truth be told, Yukinari was not of this world. A soul sent from another world had been given to a homunculus called an "angel." That's what Yukinari was. The world he had been in previously was scientifically advanced and had a high level of education, so although he wasn't a specialist in farming, he had several ideas for improving the local system.

The first one was to use the nearby lake as a source for irrigation ditches to help secure that most fickle of natural resources: water. There was also the possibility of improving soil and fertilizers.

Of course, there was no guarantee that farming in this world worked just like it had in his previous one, so a certain amount of trial and error was inevitable, but these people had always relied on the erdgod to aid them in their farming. It had simply never occurred to them to try to change the environment with their own hands.

As a matter of fact...

"It's the erdgod!"

"Good morning!"

As they spotted Yukinari walking along the road, the residents of Friedland stopped their chores to greet him. All of them were smiling, and that was evidence enough that his improved farming methods were helping.

"And he's with Lady Ulrike." They offered their greetings to Ulrike, who walked along with him. She had come to this land as the representative of Yggdra, the erdgod of the town of Rostruch, and so she was the object of the same sort of veneration as Yukinari. Crops were plants, too, so Ulrike had much to teach, and in a sense, she seemed to offer more even than Yukinari.

Dasa and Berta were with them, too, but to them the people offered only polite bows. It was less that they took the girls lightly and more, perhaps, that they were seen as Yukinari's followers—in effect, his familiars, and therefore a part of him.

Yukinari stopped and called out to a villager. "You're up and at it first thing in the morning, huh?" Initially, Yukinari had tried to speak with a tone of appropriate respect to the older townspeople, but they seemed to see this as entirely unnecessary, so now he spoke to them perfectly casually. He was a god; he couldn't appear too humble.

“Well, we’ve sure never had this much water before. I’m sure we’ll get a bumper crop this year—and that thought makes working a lot easier!” The man sounded as if he might start humming happily right then and there. Everyone around nodded as if in agreement.

“Well, I’m glad to hear that,” Yukinari said, looking at them. He added, “We may be close to town, but we are outside the walls. Watch out for demigods and xenobeasts, okay?”

“Of course, my lord. Take care yourself, honored erdgod!”

“See ya, then,” Yukinari said with a wave and set off once more among the fields.

Berta’s voice, almost hesitant, came from behind him. “They’re all so happy. I mean, you can just sort of…”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Yukinari nodded, a little bit surprised. Berta was—well, not necessarily a group thinker, but it was unusual for her to offer her own opinion or feelings without being asked. Maybe living with Yukinari and the others had changed her a little, or maybe she had spoken up because she was especially pleased by this situation. It would only be natural for her to be happy that the town she’d grown up in was growing more prosperous.

Berta had had an unusual childhood, but perhaps she was regaining the ability to feel normal emotions, and that would be a good thing.

As Yukinari thought about all this, a small body squeezed in between him and Berta—it was Dasa. “Yuki,” she said. “We should hurry. It’s not polite to make… people wait.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Yukinari said with a wry smile.

Dasa had certain social difficulties of her own, although they were different from Berta’s. Neither her face nor her voice betrayed much emotion, but even Yukinari wasn’t exactly sure why that was the case. Dasa had had an upbringing every bit as unusual as Berta’s, perhaps even more so. As an alchemist, she had been forced to live a cloistered life, and when Yukinari had met her, she had hardly been able to see. No doubt all of this had had an effect on her.

But both of them, now, were very important to Yukinari. He was surprised at how much he enjoyed the life that the four of them—himself, the two girls, and Ulrike—shared.

In his previous world, he had sought only to live with his older sister. Now, he lived in a house with three women and was trying to guide the future of a whole town. It gave him a sense of fulfillment.

But even so…

Hatsune…

Yukinari found his thoughts turning to the older sister who had been taken from him by death. The two of them had been trapped in a fire from which there was no escape.

She was dead, without a doubt. Both of them had perished, but he alone had been reborn in this other world and was able to live on in happiness. He

couldn’t help feeling guilty about it. Even though it was too late to worry about such things. Even though, looking back on it, he knew there was nothing he could have done about that fire.

Dasa spoke up suddenly. “...Yuki.”

This caused him to look up again. He saw three figures coming from the direction of town.

It was obvious they weren’t out to do farm work. They wore full suits of armor and carried swords at their hips. They weren’t mounted, but they were clearly knights armed for battle.

“...Hrk.”

The figure in the middle appeared to have noticed Yukinari and the others. His visor was up, leaving his face visible. He had golden hair and an expression that suggested a refined upbringing—for better or for worse, this young man was the son of nobility. He was handsome, yet somewhat arrogant, or pompous—in any event, his haughty look and gestures gave a rather unfriendly impression.

His name was Arlen Lansdowne. He had been a missionary knight who belonged to a religious organization called the True Church of Harris. In fact, even now, he was supposedly still part of the Church, although it was something of a façade.

He had originally been associated with a unit called the Civilizing Expedition, whose mission was to spread the precious truth of the Church among the benighted frontier barbarians with their savage customs. That was why they had come to Friedland. But despite all their pretenses, they were essentially there to convert the people by force.

The missionaries rejected the erdgod cults, and they ended up attacking Yukinari, who had assumed the role of erdgod in Friedland.

Yukinari had soundly defeated them. Not only did he overpower the knights, he destroyed the statue of the guardian saint, a mechanical soldier that was supposed to be the knights’ ultimate weapon. Dasa had helped, of course, but in effect Yukinari had single-handedly defeated the strength of an army.

Even so, this victory represented the defeat of only a single squadron. Behind them that massive religious organization, the True Church, still loomed, and if they were to discover that their powerful Civilizing Expedition had been defeated, they would only send an even more vast force.

So Yukinari had come up with an idea. He wouldn’t kill Arlen and the others, but in exchange, they would send a false report stating that Friedland had been safely subdued. Victorious units of the Civilizing Expedition generally stayed to garrison their conquests, so it wouldn’t raise any suspicions if no one came back. The knights got to live, as well as save face, since no one at headquarters had to know that they had failed in their mission. Meanwhile, Yukinari and the others would be safe from the further attentions of the Expedition.

All this meant Arlen and the knights occupied an unusual place in Friedland.

“How goes it, Arlen?” Yukinari called to his former enemy. “Off on patrol?”

At present, the knights were responsible for overseeing the safety of Friedland and the surrounding areas. Just as Yukinari had warned some of the townspeople earlier, xenobeasts and demigods made their home outside the town walls, to say nothing of dangerous wild animals. Yukinari alone couldn’t possibly protect everyone who went out to work in the fields, so he had asked Arlen and the others to periodically patrol the area.

This was one of the things the unit would have done anyway after they had converted Friedland. Hence, the knights had agreed more or less readily, despite some hesitation at accepting a request from Yukinari. At any rate, in their eyes it was better than slaving away at menial tasks around town, as they had been doing before this.

“...Yeah.” Arlen made no attempt to hide the contempt on his face or in his voice. The two men behind him had their visors down, so it was impossible to see their expressions, but they probably looked much like Arlen’s. They had, in effect, become accomplices to Yukinari by delivering that false report, but they continue to think of themselves as missionary knights of the True Church of Harris. If push ever came to shove, they could always claim that Yukinari had threatened them.

“...I can’t believe someone like you is a god,” Arlen muttered. “You could at least pay a little mind to how you behave.”

“How I behave?” Yukinari asked, raising his eyebrows. “What do you mean by that?”

“I mean exactly what I said! You are hopeless!”

“Hey, Lansdowne...” The knights behind him said his name with a touch of panic, but he ignored them.

“These people may follow outrageous frontier superstitions, but *you* are the object of their worship! If you’re going to be a god, then act like one! Do you not even understand that?!”

“‘Act like one’...?”

The definition of what a “god” was was very vague. It was simply a catchall term people used for entities more powerful than they were, so what qualified as a “god” could vary from person to person.

The True Church of Harris, to which Arlen and the other knights belonged, was a monotheistic faith, but their God was simply something they worshipped; there was no actual person who claimed to embody the deity. In that sense, the Harris Church was very similar to the religions Yukinari was familiar with.

In contrast, this world was also home to erdgods and demigods, deities that could be seen with the naked eye. There were exceptions, of course, but most of them were wild animals that had lived a long time and stored up a great deal of spiritual power. Their physical forms as well as their

personalities were diverse, and their numbers were constantly fluctuating. A wild animal might “graduate” to being a god, while other divinities might die or fade away for any number of reasons. If it had to be categorized, it was in essence a kind of polytheism.

All this only went to show the immense variety in what a “god” might be. Not that Yukinari thought there were any rules saying it had to be one thing or another.

“A god needs dignity!” Arlen said, clenching his fist to emphasize his point.

“I guess your god does,” Yukinari said without hostility, “but I’m a pretty different kind of deity…”

“As dirty as I feel comparing the two, our true faith and your savage one are still both religions! It’s precisely the ultimate dignity that makes something worth worshiping!”

“Uh… huh.”

“It’s awe-inspiring *because* it’s set apart. And it’s respected because it’s awe-inspiring. It uses its power to overwhelm, control, and finally rule all around it! *That* is how a god should act. And look at you. Chatting with the peasantry like you’re best friends. Don’t do that! Your behavior only dilutes the value of your power!”

There was a moment of awkward silence. Yukinari couldn’t understand why this was such a big deal to Arlen. They hadn’t been on the best of terms to begin with, obviously, but he had expected that Arlen, like the other two knights, would avoid saying anything that might upset him. But apparently, Arlen found Yukinari’s behavior so infuriating that he ignored the risk to life and limb and set aside any thought of self-preservation. Perhaps he could do this exactly because Yukinari, in Arlen’s own words, was lacking in the fearsome dignity of a god.

On the other hand, there was some sense to what Arlen was saying. The thought came upon Yukinari suddenly. As we mentioned, he had stopped using polite or formal language with the elderly villagers or anyone else who might normally warrant it. He had accepted the role of god, even if only temporarily, and it was possible things would go more smoothly if he were more careful to act the part.

But still…

Arlen was still ranting. “After all this you’re—”

“…Shut up.”

It was not Yukinari, but Dasa who had spoken. She was glaring at Arlen from behind her glasses.

Instantly, the two knights behind Arlen jumped forward and restrained him.

“Very sorry,” one of them said.

“We keep telling him,” the other added.

They both bowed their heads and hurried past Yukinari’s party, dragging Arlen—who didn’t actually seem to be finished speaking yet—with them. It was then that Yukinari saw that one of the knights’ suits of armor had a hole in it—specifically, at the waist.

A bullet hole.

He must be one of the missionaries Dasa had shot when they first came to Friedland. In other words, he’d had the ultimate first-hand experience of just how powerful the .44 Magnum rounds fired by Dasa’s Red Chili and Yukinari’s Durandall were—how they could punch through armor.

Apparently, the knight didn’t want to incur Dasa’s wrath again.

“You might be more godlike than me, Dasa,” Yukinari said thoughtfully.

Dasa gave him a questioning look.

“Never mind. Let’s hurry.” Yukinari smiled and gave Dasa a little push on the back, and they were walking again.

●

The young woman delivered her verdict on the state of Friedland:

“Everything’s going well.”

Her rich, golden hair shone in the light that poured in through the window. She was very pretty.

“Crops are growing in the new fields as expected, and there haven’t been any reported sightings of demigods or xenobeasts. If things keep going like this, we can expect a twenty or thirty percent increase in the harvest.”

It wasn’t just her symmetrical features. She spoke without verbal clutter, and her facial expressions were clarity itself. She was obviously an intellectual, and her every movement radiated refinement. That she was not only well-bred but intelligent would have been obvious after only a short conversation. On top of all this, the force of her personality was evident in her emerald eyes.

In some sense, all of this was only natural. She came from such a bloodline and held such an office that in our own world, she might well have been a princess.

This was Fiona Schillings, the daughter of Friedland’s mayor and the town’s current acting leader.

In many cases, the “mayors” of these remote regions were the kings or aristocrats of the small nations that had existed in the past, simply given a new title. The Schillings family had administered Friedland for generations without any particular objection from the villagers, and so they continued as mayors.

With her father's health failing, leaving him bedridden, it was now Fiona who had practical responsibility for nearly every aspect of town life.

"Well, that's good to hear," said Yukinari, seated directly across from her. Dasa sat to his left and Ulrike to his right, and Berta was there, too. The group of them had come into town to discuss a number of issues with Deputy Mayor Fiona.

"Just twenty or thirty percent, though?" Yukinari said. "I wasn't expecting it to double or anything, but I thought it might be a little more than that." He grinned ruefully.

Irrigation ditches had been dug. Fertilizer had been put down. Fields had been added. Yukinari and the Friedlanders had put in a good deal of labor to alter the environment, but it wasn't clear yet whether they would see a corresponding increase in the harvest. The number of villagers—the number of people who could do farm work—was unchanged, so maybe they just didn't have enough manpower.

"Logic is as logic does," Fiona said, not seeming very bothered. If anything, her sly smile suggested how important that twenty or thirty percent was. "There are a lot of things we won't know for sure until we try them. But even a ten percent increase in the harvest would be big."

"Well, that makes me feel a little better," Yukinari said with a shrug.

As we've said, he may have taken on the duties of guarding the town in place of the erdgod, but he lacked the ability to fulfill the deity's other role—making the land abundant. He had no way of assuring the villagers a particular result as the prior erdgod had under the system of living sacrifice.

As a result of saving one person—Berta—from the jaws of a man-eating deity, dozens or hundreds of people might die of starvation. If that happened—well, the math just didn't work out.

"Next is trade," Fiona said, shooting a glance at Ulrike. "I'm happy to say that the people of Rostruch showed an interest in several of the items we sent them. In exchange, they're willing to give us food, as well as seeds and sprouts that we can plant in our tilled fields."

"More good news. Fields weren't going to do us any good if we didn't have anything to plant in them."

A diversity of crops is important from both a nutritional and a disaster-prevention standpoint. The nutrients contained in each kind of crop are subtly different, and while some plants stand up to the cold well, others endure strong sunlight easily. Introducing other crops in addition to the ones the Friedlanders had traditionally raised would help address both of these concerns.

The fields had been expanded not just to better the harvest, but also so there would be some room to experiment with new products.

Most of the townspeople didn't grasp the details, but Fiona, who had been educated in the capital, was quick to pick up on what Yukinari had in mind. She had good intuition and learned readily. She was also good at

applying her knowledge. One reason Yukinari was able to put these ideas to the test was because she was there to help him.

"The trade routes seem to be problem-free, too," she said. "Lord Yggdra is keeping xenobeasts and demigods at bay, and the missionary knights appear to be taking their work very seriously."

"Yeah, I got the same impression," Yukinari said, thinking back to his encounter with Arlen and the other knights.

He had decided to ask the missionary knights to act as bodyguards for trade with Rostruch, as well as to patrol the farming areas. True, they had come to the area as religious invaders and he couldn't put all his trust in them yet, but this was at least a little better than taking away their weapons and putting them in chains like slaves. They were knights, and battle was their business. They were ideal candidates for patrol and guard work.

"Neither has there been any concern with the familiars." This came from Ulrike. She herself was a sort of terminal—that is, a familiar—for Yggdra, and the fact that she could speak and act here, so far from Rostruch, was because there was a chain of "intermediary" familiars placed at regular intervals along the trade route.

These familiars not only acted as a relay between Yggdra and Ulrike, but also helped protect trade. They gave off Yggdra's aura, essentially marking the route as part of the erdgod's territory and discouraging demigods and xenobeasts from getting too close.

"We intend to create a shrine for the other familiars as soon as possible," Fiona said.

"Mm," Ulrike replied.

Most of the intermediary familiars were currently living outdoors. Yggdra was a plant, so the elements didn't seem to bother her familiars much, but it also wasn't very polite to keep a god's messengers living in the rough. Fiona and the townspeople had suggested a series of simple shrines that would give the familiars somewhere to live as well as serving to mark out the trade route.

A thought came unbidden into Yukinari's mind: It's a lot like those Jizo statues that live in roadside shrines in Japan.

In Yukinari's previous world, Japan, there had been a folk religious entity known as Dosojin, "the god of roads and ancestors." Sometimes known as "the roadside god," he protected borders, made sure families flourished, and kept travelers safe. "Jizo" was the Japanese name of the bodhisattva Kshitigarbha, from Buddhism, but he had merged with the Dosojin cult, and now he could be found in small shrines that dotted the roadways.

"What is it?" Ulrike looked at him quizzically. Yukinari realized he must have been smiling.

"Oh, nothing. It's just a little bit like this deity from my homeland."

"Ah. Now that is most interesting," Ulrike said, leaning in.

"Eh, let's save it for another time." He changed the subject. "You know, we ran into Arlen on the way here."

“And I suppose he was perfectly polite to you,” Fiona said with a grim smile.

Arlen and Fiona happened to know each other. They had been classmates at the academy in the capital, and she had never known him to hold back from self-important, extreme pronouncements.

“Oh, uh, as polite as ever,” Yukinari said evasively, glancing at Dasa. *Stay quiet*, the look seemed to say. Arlen had been aggressive, yes, but it wasn’t Yukinari’s style to report the knight’s every minor transgression to Fiona. In fact, things would probably be worse if he didn’t treat it as water under the bridge. If Yukinari told Fiona what had happened, she would feel obligated to punish Arlen, and then the relationship between the townspeople and the knights, which seemed to be getting better ever so slowly, would crumble again. He wanted to avoid that.

“So it looks like we’ve started to lay a foundation,” Yukinari said, his arms crossed. “The next question is what we build on it. And I have an idea.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. Just a little something I’d like to try on some of the cultivated fields. I wanted to get your approval.”

“You don’t need that. If you want to do something, Yukinari, none of us have any right to stop you. What is it you want to try?”

“I want to whip up something from my knowledge. Use it to cover the farmland.”

“Cover it…? To retain heat?” Fiona raised an eyebrow. She seemed to be running a number of possible scenarios through her mind. “With all due respect, Yukinari, if you cover the ground, there won’t be enough light for the crops to grow, will there?”

Friedland did have a tradition of periodically using pieces of cloth or rush mats to cover the fields in order to preserve warmth or moisture, but Yukinari was thinking of something fundamentally different.

“You would be right, if we were talking about cloth or a wood board or something.” Yukinari pointed to Dasa’s glasses, the spectacles that sat across her face. “But I’m talking about glass. I’ll make a lot of glass and build a greenhouse with it.”

“A greenhouse…? Oh, you know, I saw one of those in the capital. They were using it to grow flowers from the south. You mean like that?”

“Same idea, sure.”

Trade and commerce brought many things to the capital. Among them were plants and animals from all over, brought in to satisfy the curiosity and amusement of the nobles. But that made them nothing more than a pastime for the rich, and the greenhouse was part of that.

“But greenhouses for flowers, they’re pretty small, right? Maybe just the size of one room?”

“Yes…” Fiona nodded, a fresh look of surprise on her face. “Surely you don’t mean to make one big enough to enclose an entire field?”

“I sure do. And it’s glass, so light can still get in.” He laughed.

Dasa, who had been silent until that moment, suddenly spoke. “A greenhouse made of… glass. It can allow enough light in for the plants to thrive, but because it’s a walled structure, it may… also restrict the flow of air. Opening and… closing a door can keep the temperature… and humidity at the levels necessary for cultivation.”

“You’re saying…”

“Of course, it can also keep… away bugs.”

“It can do that?” Even Fiona didn’t seem to have thought of this. A structure that could keep away harmful insects would require a fair degree of isolation. To the extent Fiona hadn’t imagined a greenhouse large enough for an entire field, she certainly hadn’t imagined one enclosed enough to keep out bugs.

This was where Dasa’s time as the assistant to an alchemist came in handy. She was quite familiar with airtight vessels and glass experimental devices designed to remain bacteria-free. She presumably saw this as the same thing on a larger scale.

As long as Yukinari produced the pieces, there would be no concern about making them to the necessary tolerances. From the parts of a gun to an artificial lens for a human eye, as long as he knew how to build something, he could make it correct down to the micron.

“With a greenhouse, we can keep growing things even when it’s cold out. We still have to be careful not to exhaust the soil, but we should be able to grow crops throughout the year, regardless of the season, and that’s got to mean better harvests.”

“I’m sure you’re right,” Fiona said, blinking. “It just never occurred to me to enclose an entire field in glass.”

In this world, glass, especially if it was very translucent, was a valuable material. Obtaining much of it would normally require a good deal of money. No one would have thought to use such a rare resource just to build a house around a field.

“Of course, glass alone isn’t strong enough. We’ll need pillars and a framework to hold everything up.”

Glass is heavy. Of course, a support made from a large tree trunk might well do the job, but in order to maximize the surface area that would receive light, it would be better to make the frame out of something like steel.

“I’ll let you take care of the materials, then,” Fiona said. “But I’ll handle the workforce. If you don’t have enough people, just let me know.”

“Sounds good. Thanks.”

“I know I keep saying this,” Fiona said with a wry grin. “But all you really have to do is give orders, Yukinari. You don’t have to thank us for anything. You’re our god.”

Yukinari found himself lost for words. In his view, all of this farming and trade was a way of atoning for showing up in Friedland, killing their erdgod,

and single-handedly dismantling their religion before he really knew anything about it. He didn't regret saving Berta, but he felt he had to take responsibility for the results of his actions. So he didn't, in fact, see himself as being in a position to give orders through Fiona to the villagers. He thought of himself as making a request or asking for help.

I guess this is exactly the sort of thing that would piss Arlen off, he thought. If a god didn't act authoritatively—even arrogantly—it might sow doubt among his followers. As long as he was going to play the part of a god, perhaps he would have to distance himself from his personal feelings about it.

Not that I'm eager to do that...

Yukinari's thoughts were interrupted by a pounding at the door. "Excuse me—excuse me, please!" A man rushed into the room.

"What is it?" Fiona said, looking reprovingly at the man. "You're being very rude."

But the man clearly had little interest in etiquette at that moment. "I—I'm very sorry. But there's something I must tell you, Miss Fiona, and quickly. If the honored erdgod is here, too, so much the better. Please, come with me to the outskirts of town!"

It didn't really sound like a request. If he thought it would be best to have Yukinari there, that meant it was likely another attack by a demigod.

In any event, the man's panic told Yukinari all he needed to know about the situation. He, Dasa, and the others got to their feet.

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The first thing they heard was the ringing of steel on steel. If that had been all, it could easily have been a blacksmith or a carpenter at work. But it was accompanied by shouts and cries, summoning an entirely different scene to the imagination.

The man led Yukinari and the others to one of the gates built into Friedland's walls, though not the one Yukinari's party had come through earlier. There was only one primary gate leading to the main road, but there were a number of smaller ports, with paths leading to the fields and the surrounding area.

They exited through a port and proceeded along a road that led toward the mountains, and they soon came upon the site of the problem.

Arlen and the other two knights who had gone out on patrol had their backs to the approaching party. All three had their swords out and their little shields raised. Ranged against them, weapon at the ready, was... just one person.

"Who are you...?"

The opponent was wearing a heavy coat, and a hood covered their eyes, so it was hard to make out anything about them. But judging by their stance, they weren't physically large. There was always the possibility they were wearing armor under that outfit, so it was hard to make any precise

judgments, but they were probably about as tall as Yukinari, and their limbs were of average length.

In their hand was a spear—no, the hybrid weapon called a halberd. It was good not just for stabbing, but also for sweeping. The distance it established gave its wielder an advantage against swordsmen in many situations, but when fighting in confined spaces, the length could be a liability.

The figure's overcoat had several crimson stains that appeared to be blood. A bandit, perhaps? But the person seemed to be holding three knights of the Missionary Order at bay without giving an inch, and was clearly trained in the halberd's use.

There was shock among the combatants as Overcoat thrust.

"Hrah!"

Arlen dodged out of the way just before he was skewered by the polearm. The weapon glanced off his armor in a shower of sparks. Meanwhile, the knights to either side of him saw their opponent extended, in what must have looked to them like a very vulnerable position, and attacked.

The construction of the human body makes people quicker at moving forward than at falling back, even more so if they happen to be carrying a long spear. The two attackers were counting on this.

But Overcoat betrayed their expectations. The figure didn't come forward or move back. They sank their body down as far as possible, striking out to the left and right. Then they pulled the halberd back, spinning on one heel while extending their body. This allowed the halberd to catch the two knights in a sweeping motion.

Both of the men had had their weight forward, and the blow knocked them to the ground. Even in full armor this gave them a pretty good shock, and they stayed down, groaning quietly.

But Overcoat didn't finish them off, instead resuming a fighting stance with the halberd and turning back to Arlen. He attacked, but the halberd deflected his sword easily; he couldn't reach his opponent. He made two or three attempts, during which time the other two knights got up again, but then they were back at square one.

"Who in the world is that...?"

Three knights against one opponent, and they still couldn't win. Because the knights attacked together, Overcoat had no time to strike a finishing blow; for the moment, they were at a stalemate.

"I—I don't know, but when I noticed the situation, they were already like this..."

Apparently, this had been going on for some time. But...

They may be evenly matched, but that person has got to tire eventually.

Just as he predicted, Overcoat's movements were becoming ever so slightly slower. It was three against one. It was obvious that the one would run out of energy first.

“Hiyah!”

Arlen must have noticed the same thing, because he leaped in with a swing of his sword. He wasn’t aiming at the opponent, but at the halberd. No doubt he was thinking about how the enemy deflected all his blows with it.

With a screech of steel, the halberd jumped from Overcoat’s hands. That settled the matter—or would have, but before the weapon hit the ground, Overcoat pulled out a longsword that had been concealed in their outerwear and attacked.

This meant the enemy wasn’t too attached to any one weapon and had a preternaturally quick ability to react to a situation.

“Hrr!” Arlen dodged the attack, a look of shock on his face. A follow-up attack came. Somehow he managed to avoid it, drawing back. If this had been a one-on-one contest, the next blow probably would have finished it.

“Yah!” The other two thrust forward, covering Arlen’s retreat. But Overcoat saw the minute difference in the speed of their attacks and easily parried. Overcoat’s strikes were clearly quicker with a sword.

“This…”

This was no average opponent. It was a warrior with a wealth of battlefield experience, well-versed in a number of different weapons.

Yukinari had given Arlen and the others Durandall weapons like his own in case they encountered any demigods on their patrols, but the knights didn’t look like they were going to use them. Perhaps they hesitated to use an unfamiliar weapon, or perhaps they felt they couldn’t aim a gun at a human opponent.

Yukinari decided it was time to jump in. “Your qualms won’t do you any good if you’re dead! Use the Durandalls!”

His shout seemed to remind Arlen and the others that they were carrying powerful weapons, because two of the knights fell back and drew the guns from the holsters on their backs.

But Overcoat didn’t stop.

It made sense, in its way. Guns had been unknown in this world until Yukinari brought them here. Overcoat probably thought the Durandalls were just crudely made swords. In fact, the firing position for a gun probably looked extremely vulnerable.

Overcoat closed the distance in an instant. The speed of it prevented the two gunners from aiming carefully, and they pulled the triggers in a panic.

Two explosions caused by .44 Magnum bullets traveling faster than the speed of sound rent the air. Even an experienced marksman, though, would find it very difficult to hit a moving target. And when one fires in a hurry, without taking time to aim first, the shot can hardly be expected to hit.

Indeed, both shots missed. The fact that one of them actually grazed Overcoat’s hood was something of a miracle. It tore the fabric and pulled the hood back, leaving Overcoat’s face exposed, but they showed no sign of being intimidated by this. A little surprised by the huge noise, but because

Overcoat hadn’t seen the bullet, they didn’t realize how frightening—how dangerous—it really was.

Yukinari made a sound of surprise when he saw Overcoat’s face. “It’s...”

The first thing he noticed was the hair, so red it seemed to be on fire. It fell into tails on either side of the face, but for the most part the hair was short, so as not to interfere with movement. Overcoat’s almond eyes were clear, the features of the face arranged symmetrically around the high bridge of the nose. Even in the midst of battle, the face showed neither panic nor anger; it looked as calm as if its owner were doing some daily chores.

But there was something still more striking about this person.

“...a woman?”

Yes. It was undeniably a woman’s face. She looked to be about twenty years old.

Yukinari wasn’t the only one to be surprised. Two of the knights froze, shocked to discover that the person who had gone toe-to-toe with the three of them was female. As they stood there, petrified, Overcoat—the woman—closed the gap to them, giving two quick slashes. The knights got their Durandalls up in time to block—barely—but they must have been heavy blows, because the guns flew out of their hands and onto the ground.

“Why, you!” Arlen jumped at the woman from behind. But she kicked off one of the knights, using the momentum to spin herself around so she was facing him.

Arlen was agog at the speed of her movement. The woman swept upward with her sword, toward his jaw. From chin to brain case: she meant to kill him with a single blow.

But the instant before she would have turned Arlen into a human shish kebab, she stopped.

That was because Yukinari had appeared with his own Durandall.

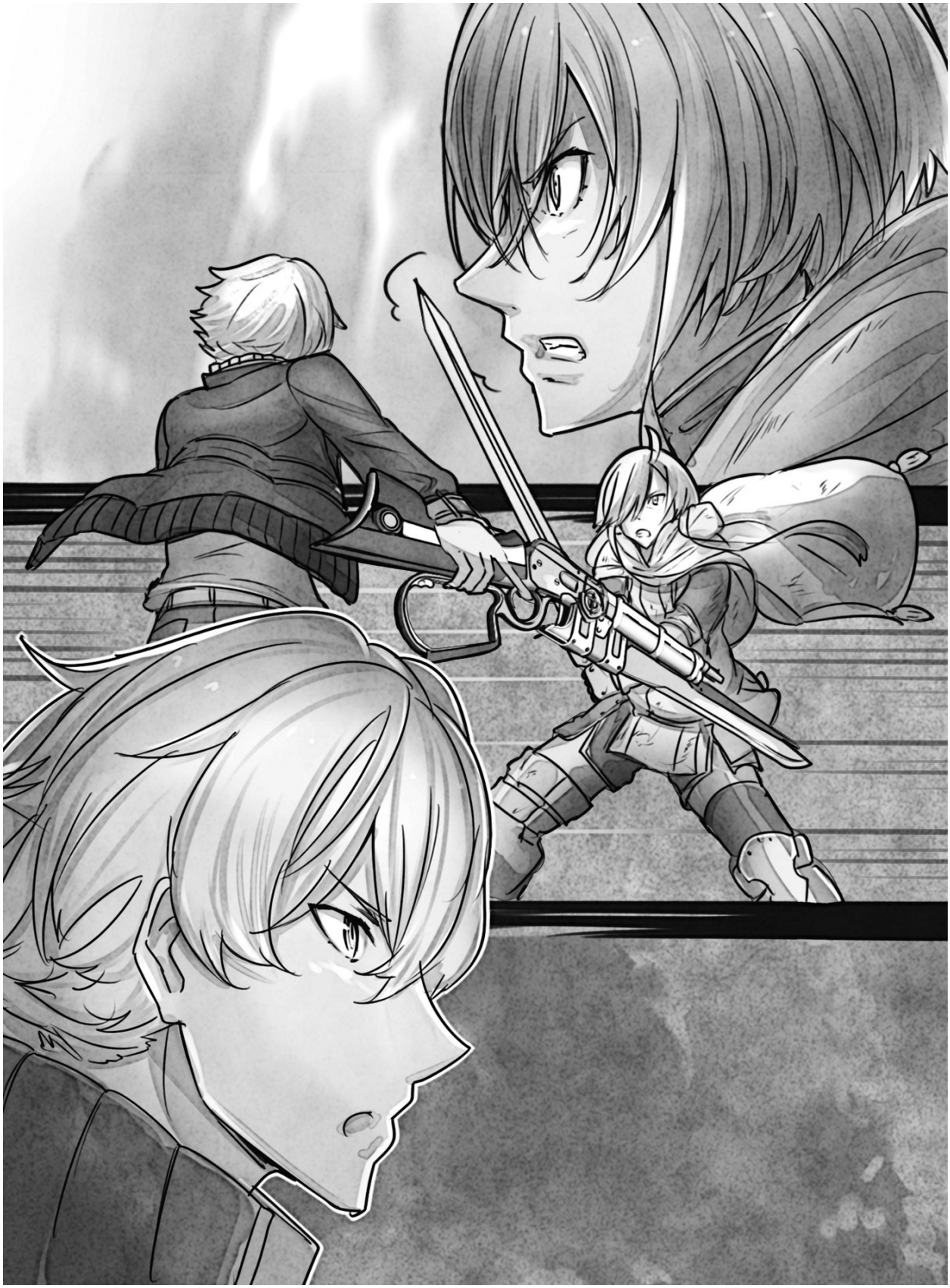
The woman immediately interrupted her attack on Arlen, taking up a stance against Yukinari. She made two or three swipes, testing him. He was startled when the next blow came, much heavier than the others, full of the intent to kill. She had aimed at his calf. People rarely think to defend their legs during a fight, and a major artery runs up the inside of the calf, so a wound there can be fatal. This woman really did know how to fight—how to face someone down on the field and kill them.

Instantly, Yukinari dropped Durandall in an effort to deflect the blow, but he was too late.

Instead...

“Yuki!”

There was a roar.



It was Dasa. She had drawn Red Chili and fired. Unlike the knights, she was used to using her gun, and her pistol was intended for sniper work. It was inherently more precise than the Durandalls. Her bullet found the woman's sword and tore it out of her hand.

"Hrgh?!" The woman used her left hand to cover her right, a shocked expression on her face. Maybe her wrist had been injured by the force of the impact. "What in the blazes was that?!"

It seemed she had finally comprehended just how dangerous a gun could be. But that, too, lasted just a moment. With astonishing speed, the woman slid her left hand into her overcoat. She must have had yet another weapon in there. On the battlefield, swords can break or be twisted; it was only common sense to bring along a backup weapon.

But Yukinari already had Durandall's blade at her neck. "Enough."

"...Grr..." For the first time, the woman looked upset. She turned hostile eyes on him. "You aren't a missionary knight! So why are you trying to stop me?"

"A missionary knight? Huh, now I get it."

She must have attacked Arlen and the others on the assumption that they were part of the Missionary Order of the True Church of Harris. And in their minds, perhaps they were—but he'd save that for another time.

"Anyway," Yukinari went on, "I want to talk to you. Put down your weapon."

"You want... what?" The woman looked at him, her amber eyes suspicious. No normal enemy would ask to talk after such an intense battle.

"You've got to be just about spent, right?"

A good look showed the woman to be panting, as if she were breathing with her shoulders. Considering that she had held off three missionary knights for quite some time, it actually suggested she had far more endurance than one might assume at first glance. But she could hardly go on forever.

And the blood on her overcoat. A close look revealed that it wasn't a splatter, but must have been her own. Her clothes underneath the coat were also spotted with blood in several places.

This made it all the more amazing that she had held her own against Arlen and his friends.

For that matter, where had this woman even come from? If she was from some other town, that would mean she had traveled alone through areas rife with xenobeasts and demigods, to say nothing of dangerous wild animals. It suggested an audacity unusual for a woman.

"Just who are you?" Yukinari asked, just a hint of frustration in his voice.

She stared at him a moment longer, still panting. "I... am..."

But she must have reached her limit, because before she could tell him her name, she lost consciousness and collapsed to the ground.

●

In the dark, a frenzied contest of steel on steel was taking place. Sparks flew in every direction, but the light they generated was far too meager to push back the all-consuming darkness. The place was in utter confusion; it was impossible to say who was where.

“Yaaaaaaah!”

A cry sounded through the forest. Was it ally or enemy?

They had agreed they would escape at midnight. Everyone wore black so as not to be seen. A guard, gold gleaming in his hand, quietly opened the back gate for them—that was how they got out. No matter how closely you were being watched, an escape could always be found if those watching you were corrupt enough.

But this guard turned out to be even more corrupt than the party had counted on. No sooner had he taken the money from them than he made a covert report to the captain of the town watch. Presumably he said nothing about the bribe he had received, playing the part of a loyal official.

They were less upset about his betrayal, however, than the fact that they had been forced to turn to someone so faithless in the first place. If they had had power enough, this whole ridiculous ploy could have been avoided.

The group got out of town, and for a while they had no problems. They kept to side roads, getting some distance from the village. When they judged they were probably safe, they went back to the main road—and right into an ambush.

The True Church of Harris. The iron fist of the Civilizing Expedition—the Missionary Order. A more fearsome enemy than any erdgod or xenobeast, perhaps the worst thing they could have run into.

“Hold fast! There aren’t many of them!”

As she tried to inspire her comrades, she drew her own weapon, a halberd, and advanced.

It should have been impossible for the knights to guess exactly where she and her escort would come back to the main road. That meant the Order couldn’t commit all its forces to any one potential ambush, but must have spread itself over several possible locations. The most worrisome thing was that the fight might drag on, allowing these knights’ friends to reinforce them.

“These sweet little knights aren’t used to a down-and-dirty fight! The conditions favor us! Stay strong and aim true! Cut them to shreds!”

On the one hand, she had merely said the first thing that came into her head, hoping to encourage her allies. On the other hand, she was right. The Order wasn’t prepared for a night battle; their movements would be imprecise.

The woman and those with her, however, always did the dirtiest work, and they were used to engaging in the dark. Although they were usually the ones setting the ambushes, not the ones being ambushed.

She was just starting to think they might survive this. But then, moonlight poured down through a break in the clouds, and in the cold, pale illumination, the knights gave a cheer. They were looking back at something.

"The saint has come! The saint fights for us!"

Just below the shouting, a sharp noise could be heard, piercing the night. It drifted across the battlefield ceaselessly, weaving a melody.

And then, as one, the knights began to chant.

"Holy, holy, holy!"

"O our august forebear! O saint who guarded the revered teachings!"

"Be incarnate now in sinews of steel, and come forth thyself to battle!"

Saint, they called it, but in the moonlight it seemed a giant, looming up as if to make the darkness darker still.

The group was in trouble. The reinforcements had arrived, and in the worst possible form.

"Men, fall back!" someone called from behind the giant—the statue of the guardian saint. "Whoever remains in front of our saint, be they friend or foe, will be destroyed!"

That was the instant the battle turned. The knights retreated like a receding tide. In their place, the massive metal figure came forward. A single glance was more than enough to tell that no ordinary human weapon would have any effect against it. It was like a man-made, metal god.

It approached them, its footsteps booming. It moved strangely; each individual movement was quick, but they didn't flow together. Each step was sickeningly fast, but there was a brief pause before the giant stepped again. Most likely, this was because the Missionary Order had to instruct it to make each movement. The result was that it was very difficult to predict what the statue would do.

And so, when its fist came down with a *whumph* of splitting air, her subordinates were unable to react immediately. The thing had been lumbering along just a second before, and now her friends were trapped in a ball of metal that moved so quickly it nearly left an afterimage.

"Hrgh—!"

"Gyah!"

Two of her men were sent flying with noises that were not quite screams, not quite cries. They disappeared into the grass by the side of the road. Chances were, they were dead. She could see the unnatural angles of their limbs and necks even as they tumbled through the air. They looked like they'd been struck with a battering ram. It might have been less disturbing if they'd had no limbs at all.

"Run!" someone shouted. "They've got the advantage!"

This brought her back to reality. The missionaries had fallen back. If anything, that opened up a chance for them to escape. The statue might be huge, and it might be powerful, but there was only one of it. If they ran as hard as they could, there was a good chance they could get away.

She and her subordinates began to flee their hunters. But then—

“Holy, holy, holy!”

This time the chanting was coming from ahead of them.

“Wha…?” She froze. Another guardian saint, coming from the other direction, was clearly silhouetted by the moonlight. In fact, there was a second statue next to it. And then…

“Fire?!”

With a roar, flames spewed from the saint’s waist. The raging inferno illuminated the feet of the Missionary Order’s ultimate weapon, making it look more awful and more terrifying than ever. The steel giant must have had oil inside it, enabling it to shoot fire. It might be able to spew boiling oil as well.

To get anywhere near any of the statues was clearly fatal, and yet at this rate, they would soon be surrounded on three sides. She presumed the reinforcements would be helping to block their escape.

“Hrg…!”

This was not good. They would all be destroyed. The only option now was to try to dodge the statues’ attacks, get behind one of them to the missionaries who were no doubt waiting there, and die fighting. The question was how long her overcoat could withstand the flames.

“No.” Someone gripped her shoulder. She looked back to find a white-haired man with only one eye shaking his head. He was the one she trusted most. He may have been past his physical prime, but he had the experience and wisdom of a lifetime of battle.

“You must run,” he said. “You must escape.”

He didn’t mean *along with everyone else*. He meant *alone*. He was telling her to abandon the rest of them.

“If you think I would ever—”

She had done a great deal of dirty work. She had learned to take every advantage in battle. But that didn’t mean—

“No, you must. I will not allow you to perish here, Princess!”

He was right. Survival was, for her, the highest imperative. Everything she had done, she had done for this. She had not been ashamed even to flee.

She remembered that day six years before. She had run, abandoning her castle, her country, and her father. And she had kept running, because that was what he had told her to do. But when would she be able to stop? When she was dead? Would she have to throw away all her companions, ignoring the deaths of everyone closest to her, until she was running, surviving, but alone?

She would sooner—

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhh!”

She sat up with a scream like a wild beast. Then, and only then, did she realize it had all been a dream.

“Where am I...?”

She looked around, taking in the strange room. It was small, with only a few furnishings, but it was clean and well cared for.

Suddenly, she noticed the girl standing by the wall. She looked to be in her early teens, by all appearances a perfectly ordinary village girl. She was seated on the floor, looking surprised. A small wooden bucket was nearby, and water, which had presumably been in the bucket, was on the floor.

It took the woman a moment to put the pieces together. The girl must have been startled by her scream.

“And who are you...?”

She thought perhaps this girl was there to guard her, but she looked so weak, and she carried no weapon. Perhaps she’d simply come to check on the woman.

“I—I’ll call Lord Yukinari.” She didn’t answer the question, but only scuttled out of the room.

The woman considered for moment. It didn’t make sense. She must have fainted from exhaustion and blood loss after her battle with the missionary knights. Why had they not tied her up? Why was she not under armed guard? This was an awfully incautious way to treat a complete stranger.

“And that young man...” The boy who had confronted her at the end, with white hair and red eyes. He’d said he wanted to talk. It seemed, now, that he hadn’t simply been trying to distract her, but had really meant it. She was being treated not as a captive, but as a guest.

“Yuki... Yukinari. So that’s his name.” She frowned. It sounded very strange to her.

●

“Ex-Excuse me!” The door of the reception room burst open, and Berta came in.

“Berta? Please remember to knock.” Fiona was talking with Yukinari and the others, a frown on her face.

“What? Oh, I... I’m sorry. But the woman... She’s awake...”

“Then I guess we should go say hello.” Yukinari stood with a grin. Fiona sighed, then followed him.

The rather distraught Berta led them to the room where the woman had been sleeping. In addition to Yukinari and Fiona, Dasa, Ulrike, and Arlen were all there.

“You didn’t even know to knock?” Arlen was saying with his usual arrogance. “I guess that’s a *country* girl for you.”

“S-Sorry...”

“I wish you wouldn’t talk about us that way,” Fiona grumbled. “It’s not like Berta didn’t know. She was just in a hurry and forgot. And for your information, she and I are practically the same age. The next time you talk like that, you’re gonna get it!”

“Wha? You insolent— Hiding behind the favor of your ‘erdgod’!”

“I don’t want to hear it, especially not from you!”

Dasa was a common sight at Yukinari's side, as was Ulrike, since she seemed to have taken a shine to Yukinari and was quite interested in the world around her. Only Arlen seemed out of place. Partly he was with them because he had been participating in the discussion when Berta showed up, but Arlen was surely curious about this young woman, as well. He and two of his companions together couldn't stop her; in fact, she had nearly overwhelmed them, something he might have been less than happy about. Arlen had some martial training, but the woman had clearly held the upper hand.

Perhaps he hoped to dampen his frustration by seeing her captive. Although that being said, she had simply been given a guest room to sleep in; they hadn't put her in jail or even bound her with chains.

She seemed to have just fainted from exhaustion... And I didn't want to have to commit a bunch of people to keeping an eye on her.

Yukinari looked at Dasa, to his left, and then at Ulrike, to his right. Both girls gave him quizzical looks.

"Yuki...?"

"What is it?"

"Nothing," he said with a smile. He could have asked them to wait in the reception room, but he doubted either one would have listened.

Fiona knocked on the door, which hung open. "You're awake?"

The woman sat on the bed, looking slightly distracted. Yukinari, however, felt something was off. She appeared to be only sitting, but a palpable attentiveness wafted from her. As he took a closer look at the woman, Yukinari realized what seemed wrong.

Her feet...

Her feet were planted firmly on the floor. But her heels didn't simply rest on the ground; they actively pressed down. Hence, the woman appeared not to have her full weight on the bed. In other words, she was ready to stand up at any time—ready to leap at an enemy at any moment. She was trying to look unguarded, but if there was an opportunity, she would take it.

She reminds me of a feral cat, Yukinari thought.

Just at that moment, Arlen stepped forward. "You should be grateful we spared your worthless life. We didn't even cut off any limbs—"

"Oh, you can ignore this moron."

"What—?!" Arlen's face paled at Fiona's remark.

Yukinari spared a wry grin for the scene and said, "Don't worry. We aren't going to hurt you."

The woman said nothing, but narrowed her eyes and glared at Yukinari. She was obviously sizing him up. She knew it was Yukinari's intervention that had led to her capture. She knew it had something to do with his and Dasa's weapons, but because she didn't know what a gun was, she couldn't possibly imagine the details.

At length, she looked at Arlen and spat, "He's a missionary knight, isn't he?"

“Hrm? Yes, I am part of the glorious—”

“Look,” Fiona said, pulling Arlen away by the ear. “Just shut up, okay? The more you talk, the more problems we have.”

Yukinari glanced in Arlen’s direction as he was dragged away shouting, “Hey, that hurts, stop it!” Then he turned back to the woman and said, “You’re right. He’s a knight of the Missionary Order of the True Church of Harris.” He gave her a pointed look. “So what?”

“The Church is after me. If I’ve been captured by friends of the missionaries, then you can hardly expect me to ‘not worry.’”

“Ahh. This is starting to make sense now.”

According to Arlen, the woman had attacked him and the others out of the blue the moment she appeared. Now Yukinari understood why. If she was running from the Church, she might have mistaken Arlen and the knights for her pursuers. Yukinari could hardly fail to understand; he knew what it meant to be on the run from the Church of Harris.

“I don’t have any way of proving it to you right now, but that guy isn’t quite your average missionary knight. I don’t know what the situation is between you and the Church, but if you don’t attack him, he won’t do you any harm. Not on my watch, anyway.”

“Damn you, Yukinari Amano, how dare you just—”

“Oh, shut *up* already!”

“Ow! Ow! My hair! Let go of my hair!” Fiona had a good, strong grip on Arlen’s golden locks.

The woman watched them for a moment, then let out a small breath. The tension throughout her body relaxed a little. Perhaps she didn’t fully trust them, but maybe this meant she was ready to talk.

“You said you were being chased,” Yukinari said. “Why?”

“I’m a mercenary,” she said. “I’ll do just about anything, and I’m not picky about my employers. Even if one were, say, a merchant conducting unlicensed trade.”

“I see.”

So this woman had been a bodyguard for someone who was conducting trade without the capital’s authorization—meaning they weren’t paying taxes.

In general, a tax was demanded to use the main roads. An additional levy might be imposed depending on the goods being transported. The administrators of each region might want payment as well. The result was that legally traded goods might be sold at many times their original price.

There was another organization that wanted “taxes,” too: the Harris Church. The church had no legal power to tax anyone, so the money merchants paid it was considered a voluntary donation—but it was not, in reality, voluntary at all.

As a result of all this, some merchants began engaging in covert trade, without the knowledge of the capital. Of course, this meant leaving the comparatively safe main roads in favor of mountain passes, and that meant

the possibility of attacks by xenobeasts or demigods. Bandits weren't unheard of, either. To protect against such threats and to keep their goods safe, these illicit merchants hired mercenaries.

"The job was to see some cargo to Aldreil, but..."

"Someone from the Harris Church found you?"

"Sort of. I didn't know, and neither did my employer," the woman spat.

"Didn't know what?"

"That a unit of missionaries was garrisoned in Aldreil."

Yukinari glanced over his shoulder at Fiona and Arlen.

"Aldreil is closer to the capital than Friedland, near a fork in the road," Fiona said.

"We came through there on our way here," Arlen said, his hair still in Fiona's grip.

"So it's sort of a staging ground for missionary units heading to the frontier?" Yukinari asked.

"It's a pretty big city," Fiona said. "So officially or not, it's always been a place where a lot of trade with the remote regions gets done. That's probably why the Church wanted it as a base for the Civilizing Expedition."

Yukinari silently added the town to his mental map of the area. He remembered a large town where he and Dasa had stocked up on supplies while fleeing the capital, back before they had come to Friedland. The main street had run straight through the center of town, and he remembered it being full of carts and wagons big and small. That must have been Aldreil.

"The Missionary Order is an organization charged with bringing the light of truth to you ignorant savages on the frontier. The Civilizing Expedition is regularly dispatched to help spread the word." Arlen sounded oddly pleased with himself.

"Thanks, Arlen," Fiona said. "Everyone knows that already."

"Just listen to me! You impossibly impatient person!" Arlen shouted down Fiona's interruption. "Now, where was I? Oh, yes. The Civilizing Expedition. Sending individual divisions directly from the capital to remote towns and villages involves a huge waste of men and resources."

"I guess that makes sense." Yukinari nodded. Even having enough food for a single unit would be a considerable amount of cargo. Add to that all the necessities of daily life. It wouldn't be very efficient to carry all that all the way to the frontier. Procuring it on location would be a much better solution.

In Yukinari's previous world, which had seen "civilizing expeditions" of its own in the Middle Ages, it had been typical to obtain resources at the destination. That was how things were back before telecommunications, or even the idea of logistics as such, had been much developed.

"So," Yukinari said. "Instead you send several units together and set up a base that can supply food and resources."

From that perspective, a booming trade town made sense. A wide variety of goods would pass through it, and all the travelers meant facilities that

could accommodate large numbers of horses and men would already be available. In other words, the garrison there wasn't simply converting the people. It was anchoring the Civilizing Expedition for the entire frontier.

"Yuki..." Dasa said with the faintest frown.

She had probably made the connection, too. This meant that there was a major base with several units of missionaries in a town not far from Friedland, and their number was likely to increase. Yukinari had been able to defeat Arlen and the other knights and even destroy their ultimate weapon, the statue of the guardian saint. But what if two or even three times as many soldiers appeared? There was no guarantee he would win. The opponents wouldn't simply be two or three times stronger. Their numbers would increase, meaning they would have more strategies open to them in battle. That would make them four times, or even nine times, more dangerous.

After a moment Yukinari asked, "Do you know the size of the garrison? How many units they have there?"

"Three separate regiments," the mercenary replied.

"That's the same as when we came through," Arlen said, crossing his arms and nodding. "Given the size of the town, they probably can't add any more."

The more people there were at the location, naturally, the more resources would be required. Because the knights of the Missionary Order would hardly have dreamed of doing farm work or raising livestock, that meant their numbers would be limited by the ability of the immediate area to produce food. For that matter, if they dominated the town so completely that trade could no longer continue, the commerce that had made Aldreil prosperous in the first place might not be able to go on. Three regiments was probably the most the place could support.

But for Yukinari and his companions, three regiments was more than threatening enough.

"I don't mind saying," Arlen added with a snort. "That by the time I got there, all the demigods and xenobeasts in the area had already been destroyed."

Maybe he meant that as a brag, but for Yukinari it was disturbing information. Any missionary unit would naturally fell the erdgod of the place they had been assigned, but if those in Aldreil had eliminated even the demigods and xenobeasts, that meant the knights there didn't have to commit much manpower to keeping the town safe. They could travel at their leisure.

All this meant that Aldreil was fully established as a base. If those knights learned what was going on in Friedland...

"This could be bad news," Yukinari muttered dispiritedly.

Arlen's unit had reported to the Church's central authority that they had defeated Friedland's erdgod, established a garrison there, and were now engaged in converting the populace. It was a lie, of course. But missionaries

and erdgods didn't normally get along, so when the Church received this report, they assumed it was true. If they learned otherwise...

"Ulrike."

"Yes?" she replied, looking pleased to be part of the conversation.

"If the Harris Church finds out what's going on in Friedland, Rostruch is going to be next in line. And probably vice versa. The missionaries in Aldreil will have to be looking for a new target soon, and it might be your town. Could you let your people know to watch out?"

"So I shall." Ulrike nodded with an innocent smile on her face, leaving it unclear whether she really understood what he meant.

They wanted to avoid doing anything that might bring the missionaries down on their heads, but they did need to be ready—be prepared.

Suddenly Berta spoke up, hesitation in her voice. "Um, Lord Yukinari... Maybe for today we should... I mean, our visitor is probably still weak... We shouldn't keep her for too long."

"Yeah, you're right."

They could just keep an eye on the mercenary for a while. For the time being, he didn't detect anything suspicious in her story. And although she was conscious now, her pallor was still poor and she clearly wasn't fully recovered. If Yukinari wanted a longer chat with her, it would be best to do it after she had rested and after they had gained her trust a bit more.

"I know you have nothing to go on except my word," Yukinari said, looking once more at the mercenary. "But again, we aren't going to hurt you. Circumstances have led us to coexist with the missionaries, but I'm no friend of the Harris Church, myself."

"Is that so?" the mercenary asked after a moment, squinting at him. "Yukinari—that's your name, isn't it? Just who or what are you?"

"I'm the erdgod around here," Yukinari said with a shrug.

"A god? But—"

"We can talk details once you're feeling a little better. It takes a while to tell the story. Anyway, what's your name? I'd hate to just have to call you 'you' forever. And you already know my name."

For a long moment, the woman looked at the ground, furrowing her brow in silent thought. She seemed to decide that there would be no disadvantage in telling them her name at this point, because she nodded and looked back up at Yukinari.

"It's Veronika."

That was all she said. It seemed she had no intention of telling them her last name. But it was enough for now. Yukinari nodded at her again, and then he ushered everyone out of the room.

●

The remote regions, far from the capital, were frankly inconvenient.

Human settlements were scattered across the land, connected by the merest of roads. Over the generations, the king and the nobles in the capital had shown little interest in the more far-flung parts of the kingdom, not

even seriously attempting territorial expansion. As long as they got their taxes, that was all they cared about. In many cases, local rulers had simply been left in charge.

Often, these frontier areas were still dominated by monsters like demigods and xenobeasts; even on the main roads, safety wasn't guaranteed. This made it difficult for trade and communications to develop and, combined with the erdgod cults that were a frequent feature of these areas, only deepened isolation from the capital.

The result was that many of these places were cities in name only; in reality, they could practically be ghost towns.

Then again, sometimes conditions were just right, people and resources gathered in one particular town, and a measure of development would take place.

Aldreil, while obviously nothing like the capital, was a thriving city by frontier standards. It had prospered as a center of trade, attracting people and goods from all over the surrounding area.

"Well, well. Not bad." Angela surveyed the town from a tall platform.

She was still a young woman, not yet twenty, but many things about her made her look older than she was—her strong, close-set eyes, her height, her long, black hair, her poise, and last but not least, her generous chest. It would have been evident to anyone at a glance that she was from the capital's upper crust. She exuded a certain glamor just standing there.

Many among the nobility entered the Missionary Order of the True Church of Harris essentially to bolster their reputations. It had been generations since the wars of unification had ended, and with no more enemies to fight, the role of the military had become largely ceremonial. Nowadays the only soldiers who got real battle experience were those in the Missionary Order.

Angela Jindel had joined the missionaries for exactly that reason. But unlike most of the women in the Order, who left as soon as they had served long enough to keep up appearances, Angela had chosen to remain a knight. She was a fervent disciple—she was immensely grateful for the teachings of the Harris Church and passionate about spreading them to the sorry peasants who languished in ignorance.

She was in Aldreil with the returning Civilizing Expedition. The town, which served as a base for the Expedition, had an unmistakable whiff of rusticity to it, but it was also an excellent place for the missionaries to collect themselves and rest from the road after a long journey. The influx of goods from other parts of the frontier meant that—although again, the selection was nothing like that to be found in the capital—most things a person might need could be found in the city. Be it food or other daily necessities, living in Aldreil left one wanting for little.

Angela's unit, the Ninth Missionary Brigade, was to continue traveling even farther from the capital in order to relieve another unit. For the month or so until the switch, they would stay here.

Angela liked Aldreil, more or less, so she was assigned to guard duty, which she executed with just as much zeal as any other job. The main task of the Missionary Order was to spread the teachings of the Harris Church to places where they weren't yet known, but they were also charged with keeping the peace in areas that had already been converted. They patrolled the town, interrogating—or rather, getting information from—townspeople to make sure nothing bad was happening and there were no faithless betrayers who might turn against the Church's precious teachings.

"Shall we?" Angela said to the knights with her. She climbed down from the observation platform and began her patrol.

Many people stood in place, eyes down, when they saw Angela's party. They knew any suspicious action could bring punishment from the missionaries, so they tried hard not to draw attention to themselves. Each of them wore the metal ring known as the holy mark around their neck, so none of them dared to confront the missionaries openly.

"Excellent," Angela murmured as she and the knights walked along. "Absolutely excellent."

They started, however, when they saw a middle-aged man standing in the middle of the street, flanked by several missionary knights.

"Captain!" They ran up to the man at a gentle jog, then bowed their heads to him in unison. It was a natural gesture of respect to their commanding officer—Richard Bateson, the leader of the Ninth Missionary Brigade.

Bateson was a robust man in his middle years. His small eyes gave the impression of being practically buried in his square face. Although he was from noble stock, like Angela, his features looked more like those of a field worker. His history included no notable military success, but the way he had tirelessly worked his way through the ranks earned the trust of his subordinates.

"Vice Captain. Anything to report?"

Angela straightened up even further, careful to remain stock-still as she answered, "Sir! Nothing unusual, sir."

"How's the distribution of the holy mark coming?"

“At present, almost the entire population of the city has been granted the holy mark.”

“Almost?” A note of displeasure entered Bateson’s voice.

Angela added quickly, “There’s a small handful of residents whose whereabouts are currently unknown—”

“And how is that?”

“We suspect they may be savages, still worshiping the erdgod.”

The missionaries who had felled the erdgod had been members of the Third Missionary Brigade, which had been here before Angela’s unit. They had already departed Aldreil for points more remote, but perhaps all the missionaries looked the same to the people of the city. The most devout followers of the old cult might not even understand that they had been liberated from subjection to an evil faith; they might feel they were bringing justice for their fallen god.

“Whatever the case,” Angela continued. “The situation in the city is stable. We have no end of eager disciples of the Harris Church, and there is no discord among the citizenry.”

Once the Third Brigade had defeated the erdgod, a steady flow of missionary units had arrived here from the capital, such that three units were constantly garrisoned in the city. Most of the populace had given up any thought of resistance.

“Oh, Captain, hello!”

Several of the townspeople came over when they saw Bateson. Many people kept their distance, afraid of the missionary knights, but a small handful would approach with smiles on their faces. There were some in every town. They fancied themselves smart enough to see an opportunity when it came along. But really, they were just cozying up to those in power. The way they would simultaneously turn up their noses toward those who were weaker than themselves—and act as if they were somehow keeping the equilibrium by doing so—was truly ugly.

These were the people who had been actively cooperating with the missionaries since they arrived. Now they had made themselves the town’s overseers, behaving as if they were the missionaries’ equals. Angela felt nothing but contempt for them.

The goal of the Missionary Order was, as its name implied, to convert the populace. Those who didn’t resist, but even went out of their way to help, were very useful—one might even argue she should feel a measure of affection for them. But Angela, who took her own creed so seriously, felt that anyone who would sell their faith at the drop of a hat deserved to be spat on. There was a special stink, she thought, that could be detected on those who took advantage of the chaos of conversion to play out personal vendettas or raise their own status.

“If you would be so kind, sir…” One of the men had pressed his hands together and was looking up at Bateson beseechingly. No doubt he was going to bring yet another annoying petition. She felt for Bateson, who was

the one stuck dealing with these matters, but since the captain seemed willing to listen to the man, it would hardly do for Angela to jump in and chase him off.

Bateson continued to listen to the man, his expression as unchanging as if it had been carved from stone. Most of the other knights, like Angela, seemed to find the man and his request tiresome, because they glanced vacantly here and there.

Maybe that was why they were slow to react.

From behind the jabbering townsperson, another man approached Bateson. Angela saw that he was reaching into his bag, but she didn't register danger. She had seen plenty of informants pull out lambskin sheets with the names of people they wanted to turn in. This was probably more of the same.

She hadn't imagined he might pull a blade from his pouch. Nor that he would then dive at Bateson with it.

"Yah!"

"Captain!"

But Bateson was no amateur. Maybe he had sensed the man's homicidal intent. Whatever the case, he raised one of his huge, muscled hands and slapped the blade away before it reached his throat.

If only the blow had thrown the weapon to the ground. But the attacker held on, stabbing without regard for whether the wound would be critical, and the knife buried itself deep in Bateson's abdomen.

"Hrrgh…"

Bateson groaned aloud, but in a testament to his strength, didn't fall to his knees. In fact, with his right hand, he grabbed the hilt of the weapon, along with the hand of the man holding it. The man tried to jump backward, but Bateson had a crushing grip on him, and he couldn't get away.

"An attacker! Restrain him!" Angela's shout sent the missionaries into frantic action.

They apprehended the man without difficulty. On closer inspection, he looked truly impoverished; any one member of the Missionary Order could easily have overpowered him. That made them all the angrier that he had slipped through their defenses.

"Someone accompany the captain to the infirmary!" Angela ordered, never taking her eyes off the attacker.

His clothing was tattered. Perhaps he had been camping in the wilderness recently in order to evade the knights' roundups, because his outfit was dusty and dirty, and his beard was unshaven.

"This is the curse of the erdgod! I am the hand of justice! Do you see now, you—"

His captors didn't allow him to finish, but smacked him soundly on the back of the head. He was slammed to the ground, groaning as his face struck the dirt.

So he was one of the supporters of the old god.

“Very well,” Angela said coldly, looking down at him. “If you’re so keen on justice, then you won’t mind an impartial trial.” She was speaking less to the man and more to the group of gawking bystanders that had formed when people started to notice the commotion. She had to send a message to these dim country types, or there might be more attacks.

“You attempted to murder Richard Bateson, the captain of the exalted Ninth Missionary Brigade. Attempted murder of a holy knight. That amounts to treachery against our God! I sentence you to death!”

This provoked a murmur among the onlookers. Her unilateral decision had frightened them.

“H-How is this impartial?” the man gasped, his face still shoved into the ground.

Angela gave him a thin smile. “Don’t worry. There’s even someone to act as your defense—right here.” She turned to one of the missionary knights beside her. “You’re his friend, starting now. Do you have any objection to the verdict?”

“Ma’am! No, ma’am!”

“And what about you?” she asked another of the knights. “You’re his friend, aren’t you?”

“No objection, ma’am!” The knights didn’t even look at the man on the ground.

The man forced his head up, shouting, “Th-This is outrageous! This is no trial!” But Angela had no interest in him.

“You there. Stop where you are.” She instructed her knights to restrain the men who had first spoken to Bateson. The moment the attacker had been overpowered, they had started discreetly backing away, still smiling, but now…

“You’re all accomplices.”

“What? B-But why—?” they protested, eyes wide.

“You were the ones who spoke to the captain,” Angela said coldly. “You made the opening for this man to attack. You’re as guilty as he is.”

“You—you have no proof…”

“You traded a look with this scum. I saw it.”

A chorus of *Yeah*s and *I saw it too*s came from the assembled knights. Since the captain had gone for medical treatment, that made the vice captain, Angela, the absolute authority here. If she had pointed to a bird and called it a fish, they would all have agreed that fish were quite talented fliers.

“As you see, I have witnesses. I pronounce you guilty of being this man’s accomplices.”

“W-Wait—!”

“I, Angela Jindel, Vice Captain of the Ninth Missionary Brigade of the Civilizing Expedition of the True Church of Harris, now pass judgment. All of you shall be put to death.”

It was wonderful to make that declaration. At a swoop, she could eliminate the entire group that had been nettling her.

"The sentence will be carried out tomorrow morning. A guillotine shall be constructed in the main square, and a public execution shall be held!"

"Wait! Wait, you can't—!"

"Take them away," she ordered her knights. Then she looked around. Everyone who had been staring in shock at the "trial" quickly looked at the ground, making themselves as small as possible so as not to draw the attention of Angela and her men.

Good. This would discourage at least some among them from plotting evil. How many birds had she killed with this stone? A firm hand was so important in education.

"All right, let's resume our patrol," she said to her knights, sounding satisfied. Then she set off walking at a brisk pace.

●

By the time Yukinari and the others got back to the sanctuary from Friedland, the sun had already set. Yukinari had only meant to do what he always did: see how things were going in town, offer some suggestions, and come home. But dealing with the attack (or whatever you wanted to call it) of the mercenary Veronika had made him much later getting back than usual. Typically, it would be far too dangerous to leave town after dark, but with both the "acting erdgod" Yukinari and Yggdra's familiar Ulrike together, there really wasn't much to worry about. He didn't get the sense that there were any animals on the prowl tonight, anyway.

"Still, we ended up spending all day in town," Yukinari muttered. He sat on the floor of his room, beside the map of the area that occupied some of the floor space. He had some things to think about, and it was much easier to organize his thoughts when he had this diagram to look at.

Aldreil.

Yukinari remembered correctly: he and Dasa had passed through there once, before they had come to Friedland. The city seemed like it had simply sprung up on top of the main road; it was easier to get to—and away from—than many of the towns on the frontier.

Aldreil was maybe four or five days' walk from Friedland. With a distance like that, it was hard to decide what to do. By carriage, it was quite possible to get there in just a couple of days. It was too close to ignore entirely, but not close enough to do anything about in the immediate future. Maybe it really had been turned into a base for the Civilizing Expedition, but if so, it would be very difficult to determine the strength of their forces.

He had to think about Rostruch, too. Rostruch was several days' journey past Friedland, so if a unit of the Missionary Order set out for that town, they would probably come through Friedland first. Officially, Arlen and his unit had already subjugated Friedland. That meant there was a good chance that any unit bound for Rostruch would pass through the already "converted" town.

Ulrike had been present for everything that day, so there was no need to warn her again, but Rostruch was Friedland's accomplice in conducting covert trade and might be considered to be in league with the town if it came to a confrontation with the Missionary Order. He had to consider what might happen then.

"Yukinari, might I have a word?"

He looked up to find Ulrike on the far side of the map.

"Hm? Oh, sure. What do you—" He stopped. "Ulrike."

"Hm?"

"Don't squat like that."

"Why not?"

"It… doesn't leave much to the imagination."

Ulrike cocked her head quizzically for a second, then said, "Ah! This has to do with reproduction. Does squatting inflame your sexual desire?" For some reason, this familiar of Yggdra—a plant-based erdgod—sounded pleased about this.

"It does not."

"It's all right. You are fellow animals."

"Just cover up, will you?!" Yukinari was desperately looking away from her.

Even seeing her naked somehow hadn't seemed as plain *wrong* as the glimpse of her legs that peeked out from the hem of her clothes. Ulrike's robe hung long—but, like a tail coat, was longer in the back, leaving a good deal of her legs visible from the front. When she crouched down, her robe actually covered very little.

As a matter of fact, Ulrike was wearing underwear—a garment that covered her lower body like a combination of stockings and long socks. But for some reason, it left her inner thighs exposed, and when she crouched, this normally hidden bare skin was plainly visible. Combined with Ulrike's very young appearance, it left Yukinari feeling more than a little dirty.

"Okay. What did you want to talk about?"

"Mm. About the discussion this morning. We have had, in our way, an idea. We seek your opinion."

"Let's hear it," Yukinari said, straightening up. He wanted to be at his most proper because he knew that in this conversation, he would be speaking not to "Ulrike," but to the shared consciousness of all the humans who made up the self-awareness of the plant-based erdgod, Yggdra. In many ways, it was the closest thing to what Yukinari thought of when he imagined a "god."

"Concerning the matter of trade," Ulrike said. "Are Friedland and Rostruch not somewhat distant from each other? To travel from one to the other periodically is one thing, but they are perhaps too far to transport goods on a daily basis."

Yukinari didn’t reply immediately. He had been assuming she wanted to talk about what to do if the Missionary Order attacked, and now he had to reorient himself. “Well, that’s true, but…”

Sprouts and seeds were one thing; a relatively small number of them could be brought to Friedland and used to grow more. But if they had to transport a large number of bags stuffed with wheat, they would need guards, and the amount of labor required to conduct commerce would increase dramatically. Yukinari had determined that even so, there would still be enough benefit to both parties to justify the effort. That was why he had initiated trade in the first place.

“On that note,” Ulrike said. “What about a mode of transport that does not use guards or carriages? The amounts that could be moved would be limited, but it would require fewer resources as well.”

“No guards or carriages? There’s no way—”

“There is the way I delivered you from Rostruch to Friedland before, is there not?”

“Delivered me? You mean—”

Finally he saw what she was getting at. When Yukinari had gone to Rostruch to investigate the possibility of trade, a demigod had attacked Friedland in his absence. He had needed to rush home to protect the town, but the distance was too great for even Yukinari to cover it very quickly. On that occasion, he’d received help from Ulrike’s “mother,” Yggdra.

“I’m not sure most things could handle being ‘delivered’ that way.”

He remembered the experience, and it struck him as much too violent for most things or people. Yggdra had returned Yukinari, and Dasa as well, to Friedland by draping a vine across the branches of two huge trees and launching the pair of them back home. They had, in essence, traveled by the world’s biggest slingshot.

Needless to say, for this method to be remotely safe, some way of slowing down upon reaching the destination was required. When Yukinari was in his “angel” form—the body that allowed him to use his powers to the fullest—wings sprouted from his back. They weren’t intended for flight, but they made it possible to control his attitude, and so he’d managed to land in Friedland with some semblance of grace.

But a load of goods with no way of controlling its own flight path would simply smash into the ground. Even if the contents came through intact, they would be scattered everywhere, and collecting them again would be a major chore. To say nothing of the danger to anyone the delivery happened to come down on.

Ulrike, however, had a way around these concerns.

“Could we not make a large lake and drop the deliveries there? To ensure the contents do not scatter, we could use a shell such as you made before.”

“I see what you mean…”

The “shell” Ulrike referred to was a half-globe of metal Yukinari had produced as a defense mechanism when he was fighting Yggdra. He could simply make a complete globe along the same lines, and the seeds or any other deliveries could be put inside and safely launched. When the globe came down in the lake, they would retrieve it. Problem solved. If they could ensure the globes would be fired with enough accuracy, they didn’t even need water. A huge net could be used to catch the deliveries.

Ulrike’s suggestion certainly had some appeal. But...

“Over such a long distance...”

Accuracy would become the main problem. It was the equivalent of doing sniper work, albeit with gigantic plants instead of a gun.

The environment was constantly changing; it was never really stable. Temperature and wind direction could vary from day to day, to say nothing of season to season. Trying to consistently land the “bullet” in one specific spot was a very tall order.

Even if Yukinari was able to create a lake or a net large enough, they would need a more detailed map than they currently had in order to make fine adjustments, along with measuring devices to tell them the ambient temperature and wind direction. If they got the angle even a little wrong, it could result in being several hundred meters off target.

“Anyway,” Yukinari said. “Aren’t you worried that the globes might be attacked by flying demigods or xenobeasts?”

“I don’t know,” Ulrike said, looking equally puzzled. “This has never been tried.” Well, that was fair enough.

At some point, though, they might need defenses against an enemy who came from overhead. The birdlike demigod they had encountered before was able to escape in one of their battles because it had gotten out of range of both Yukinari’s Durandall and Dasa’s Red Chili. Both weapons fired bullets, meaning they weren’t accurate over extremely long distances.

They might need some kind of gun and ammunition that could be used over massively longer distances than what they had now. This had been on Yukinari’s mind ever since his encounter with the flying demigod, but he’d been too busy to give it much thought.

And if it really comes to a battle with Aldreil’s garrison...

In that case, long-range weapons would probably be an asset.

“I’ve got to make... some kind of sniper rifle...”

“Sni-per-ri-fle...?” Ulrike said, tilting her head like a bird.

It wasn’t a word she would know, coming from the world she did. Here, bows and arrows constituted the extent of ranged weaponry, and guns that fired using black powder didn’t exist at all. At least, Yukinari had never seen anyone carrying a gun.

“It’d take forever to explain,” he said with a half-smile. “When it’s done, I’ll show you.” Then he added, “I like your idea. Thanks,” and patted Ulrike on the head. It was something he always did with Dasa, and it had become a habit.

Ulrike looked startled for a moment, but then her eyes squinted like a cat, and she smiled. It was outrageously adorable.

"Anyway, I'll think about if there's a way to make it work." Yukinari felt his heart rate jump, and he mentally repeated, *She's just a plant, she's just a plant...*

Maybe Ulrike noticed this, or maybe not, but she nodded happily and said, "I see. Understood. I shall not hesitate to aid you if I can, Yukinari, for you are my friend."

●

After he was done talking to Ulrike, Yukinari went back to his room, where he found Dasa sitting on his bed, waiting for him.

"Yuki... Exam."

"Sure, I know."

Dasa's eyes weren't exactly the ones she'd been born with. She'd had cataracts since birth, leaving her largely unable to see. Yukinari had put in artificial lenses, and now she had normal vision. But the treatment he'd given Dasa was based on what the doctor in his previous world had said when Yukinari's sister was going to undergo cataract surgery. Yukinari himself had no specialized training.

He hadn't even had a sterile room to do the surgery in. He tried to clean and sterilize things as best he could, but an amateur could only do so much. As a result, he had to regularly check Dasa's eyes to make sure everything was still normal, especially that there was no inflammation.

He sat down next to Dasa and reached over. "I'm going to take off your glasses."

But Dasa took Yukinari's hand and gently lowered it.

"Dasa? What's wrong?"

"Today it's my... turn to do the ex...am," she said haltingly, still holding his hand.

"What do you mean?"

"Yuki, your... body." She let go of his hand and touched his chest.

Strictly speaking, Yukinari's body wasn't human. It was a homunculus, created using alchemy. He was an angel—the word meant *messenger*—a living alchemical device originally intended for the True Church of Harris to use when converting a populace. The "miracles" the angel could perform would convince the people of the truth of the church's teachings.

The person who had built Yukinari's body was Jirina Urban, an alchemist under confinement by the Church. She had taken it upon herself to create an angel with a sense of self—that was Yukinari. For this, the church had purged her, meaning there was no one left who could examine him with complete confidence.

But Dasa was Jirina's little sister. She'd been Jirina's assistant for as long as she could remember, so she had a fairly extensive knowledge of alchemy. Her impaired vision meant she hadn't read any books on the

subject, but by talking constantly to her sister, she had become quite knowledgeable.

As noted, the Church kept alchemists and their families under confinement—outwardly, the True Church condemned alchemy as heresy—so Dasa had known almost nothing about the outside world until she met Yukinari. The result was that much of what she knew was secondhand, or rather, it had no practical experience to back it up.

“I feel fine.”

Dasa said nothing, but only looked at Yukinari in displeasure over the rim of her glasses, her hand still on his chest.

“Okay, I get it,” he said with a shrug.

Dasa was normally quite willing to do what he said, but once in a while she became possessed of a great stubbornness. Especially when it came to “her” field—alchemy, where, after Jirina died, Dasa had been something of a teacher to Yukinari. At times like these, the best course of action was just to go along with her. Yukinari had learned this from experience during their travels. When she felt wronged, Dasa could pout for very long time.

“Take off your shirt.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“You only need to say… it once.”

Yukinari removed his shirt, and Dasa put her face close to his chest.

“Hey, what’re you—”

“Hold… still.”

“I—I don’t think this is an exam!”

“It is,” she said, turning her head as if she were going to rub her cheek against his bare chest.

It took Yukinari a moment to realize that she was conducting the exam with her senses of hearing and touch. Because Dasa had spent so long unable to see, her auditory and tactile perception were highly developed. And although she could see with no problem now, she still seemed to have some trouble relying on her sight—she preferred to confirm what she saw using her hearing and touch, and even her sense of smell.

“Close your… eyes, and lie… on your side.”

“R… Right…”

He got the idea, but this was the first time she had ever examined him at such length. It was confusing. But when Dasa got into her “little sister of an alchemist” mode, he knew it was best not to contradict her. So, with some hesitation, he lay down on the bed.

She is just… using her hearing and touch to check me out, right?

He remembered doctors in his previous world doing something similar. So he closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and let the tension out of his body.

The first thing he felt was a thin, cold finger. It traced a line along his chest. At first it felt ticklish, but soon the chilly digit felt comfortable. The

touch had a certain tenderness, but from time to time the finger would press down firmly or tap gently. That meant she really was examining him.

Simultaneously, Dasa pressed her ear to Yukinari's chest, listening carefully to his heartbeat. Her silver hair and the breath leaving her mouth tickled, too, until he thought he might actually laugh out loud.

If anyone else saw them like this, what would they think? Ulrike seemed to have gone to sleep early, and Berta had stayed in Friedland to look after Veronika. There shouldn't be anyone else at the sanctuary who might see them.

Yukinari opened his eyes a little bit. Dasa's face was at his chest again; she was rubbing her nose against it gently. Checking the smell, perhaps. Come to think of it, he had once heard that it was possible for animals to detect people in ill health by their body odor.

"...Yuki."

"Oh, uh, yes?" he said, quickly closing his eyes again.

"You've been... working a bit too hard recent...ly."

"I don't really think so."

"Don't... overdo it, okay?"

"I'm fine."

"I'm... not."

Yukinari was lost for words. For better or worse, it seemed she had seen through him.

Yukinari had decided to stay in Friedland, to act as its god, for Dasa. When she lay dying, Jirina, to whom he owed everything, had asked him to take care of Dasa, and in order to protect her, the two of them had been living on the run ever since. But for Dasa, who had only ever known life inside an isolated Church facility, the constant travel was becoming a burden. For her sake, Yukinari had wanted to settle down somewhere.

This was hardly lost on Dasa. She was forever anxious about the fact that it was her fault Yukinari was forcing himself to take the role of a god like this; it hurt her to watch.

"Yuki, you're... tired."

Dasa spoke from where she lay practically on top of him.

“Maybe I am.”

“Your heartbeat and your scent are slightly different from before.”

“My heartbeat? I think it’s just—”

—because of what you’re doing right now, he thought, but couldn’t bring himself to say.

By *before*, Dasa probably meant the times when they had often slept under a single blanket or overcoat together. Now that he thought about it, he remembered how often Dasa had pressed her ear to his chest or breathed in the smell of him. Of course, he’d had his shirt on then.

“Are you worried about something?” she asked. Silently, she seemed to be saying, *You can tell me.*

She really was worried about him. Ever since Jirina had entrusted Dasa to him, Yukinari had been totally focused on protecting her. He had believed himself willing to give up everything for. But in her own way, Dasa had been looking out for him, too.

He had known that. And recently, he hadn’t been paying it much mind.

Maybe he *had* been feeling a little tired. He just hadn’t had the time to admit it.

“All this time,” he said with a small smile, “I’ve been trying to protect just what I can see. Like, fighting back when the Missionary Order attacked. Driving off that demigod to help keep the townspeople safe. I’ve been thinking I can get by just protecting what I can see, what I can reach.”

Dasa said nothing, but he felt her stir against his chest. He placed a hand on her back as he continued.

“I basically thought, if I could protect you, that was all that mattered. What did I care about anything else? I’ve already died once, and over here I don’t have an older sister—or any family. I didn’t know what to do, but I wanted to at least do that, to protect you. I thought if I could, things might just work out somehow.”

“Yuki…”

“But lately I’ve learned the hard way that it’s more complicated than that.”

To protect someone, to give them the peace of mind to live their lives, one had to safeguard an environment in which they could be free of worry, in which they could live. But to preserve stability in a fundamentally unstable environment meant ensuring you had the leeway to respond to sudden or unexpected developments.

And for that, it was necessary to take into account an even larger environment.

And…

“I’m sorry, Dasa.”

A questioning silence.

“With everything that’s happened, I’ve come to care about the Friedlanders, too.”

He had only meant to use this town as an environment that he could take advantage of to protect Dasa. But now he found the townspeople meant something to him—not as much as Dasa, perhaps, but something. Here, there were people he was close to, of course, like Berta and Fiona, but also the many townspeople he had met through them. Most of them revered Yukinari as a god; they looked at him with such profound respect in their eyes. How could he not feel something for them?

“But that means I have to look after an even larger environment.”

In order to keep Friedland safe, he had initiated trade with Rostruch, and as a result he had become personally acquainted with Rostruch’s erdgod Yggdra and her familiars, including Ulrike. Ulrike had called him a friend; it was a sign that they weren’t simply partners in trade—they weren’t simply using each other for mutual benefit.

The most important person in Yukinari’s life was still, without a doubt, Dasa. But before, Dasa alone had been important to him. There had been no question of order, because there was no one else in his heart. He cherished so many more things now. There was joy in that, but it also weighed on him.

“I have to look as far afield as I can if I’m going to play the part of the erdgod,” he said. “The townspeople expect it of me. Before, I always just felt I had to do what I could. But if you’re going to play god, there’s a lot more to worry about. From that perspective, honestly, I think I was sort of naïve about what it meant to be a deity.”

In his previous life, Yukinari’s mother had gotten sucked into religion and had all but left her family behind, so he was deeply suspicious of the whole concept of “god.” In his eyes, it was nothing but a way to stop people from thinking, to rob them of their money and time. But…

“Setting aside the morality of living sacrifices, erdgods are really amazing. They can do all this just… naturally. Not that I would want to become one with the land even if I could; I’d lose my sense of self.”

“…Yuki.” Dasa, unusually, interrupted him. He looked at her and saw that she was still on top of him—but she had risen slightly to look him in the eye.

“You’re definitely… working too hard.”

“…Maybe so.”

“You want… to… do everything yourself.”

This made him blink.

“You… protect me, Yuki… so I want… to… protect you.”

“Dasa…”

“With alchemy… humans tried to understand… the laws of nature, and… replicate them. You may… not be a god, Yuki… but one… day… you’ll be able to do the same things a god can do. I’m sure… of it.” There was conviction in her voice. “And I… will help you.”

There was a long pause before Yukinari said, “Thanks.”

Then he mussed her hair. The silver-haired girl squinted like a cat cozying up to its owner and pressed her cheek to Yukinari's chest again.

●

That night, Berta remained in Friedland proper rather than going back to the sanctuary. As the shrine maiden who had been offered to Yukinari, normally it was her duty to stay by his side, but Fiona had specially requested her to stay and Yukinari had agreed, so she was spending tonight in the Schillings mansion.

Fiona wanted Berta to look after the mercenary, Veronika.

Ultimately, Veronika was allowed to stay in the guestroom of the mansion for the time being. She was obviously strong and seemed to be trying to put on a calm front to avoid any show of weakness. But she had fled from Aldreil to Friedland without proper rest, and she was wounded as well; her fatigue would be extreme. Somebody would need to see to her health for a while.

Currently, Friedland was working on several development projects at Yukinari's suggestion, chiefly ways to improve farming. Much of the populace was busy working on those projects and unable to help accommodate an unexpected visitor. Hence, responsibility for Veronika had fallen to Berta.

But once she had changed the bandages on Veronika's wounds, brought her food, and cleaned the room, she found she was out of things to do.

Berta had never really been properly educated. At most, she knew how to keep things clean so as not to cause trouble for other people. She knew that the mercenary's wounds had to be kept clean and provided with fresh dressings regularly, but she didn't know much beyond that.

"Um…"

She looked at Veronika, hesitant. Throughout most of her life, she had been surrounded by girls younger than herself—so when faced with a grown woman, she wasn't quite sure what to do. She thought it might be good to talk about something, but she didn't know what.

Veronika was a mercenary. Berta knew the word, but she had no idea what the job actually entailed—other than that mercenaries seemed like scary people. And although Veronika was in fact quite lovely, the perpetually hard expression on her face made Berta reluctant to engage her in conversation.

So a supremely uncomfortable silence reigned in the guestroom.

Despite this, Veronika showed no sign of going to sleep, so Berta didn't even know whether it was appropriate for her to withdraw to another room. For better or for worse, Berta was a very serious person, so when she was told to be with Veronika at all times, she would not shirk her responsibility. But still…

"You."

Perhaps even Veronika could no longer stand the silence, because she suddenly spoke. Berta responded with a touch of panic, but inside, she was also deeply relieved.

“Oh, Y-Yes? What can I do for you?”

“Would you tell me your name?”

“Oh…” It was only then that Berta realized she had never so much as introduced herself. “P-Pardon me. I’m called Berta!”

“Berta. Hmm…” Veronika muttered the name as if testing the weight of it; then she turned her clear gaze back on her caretaker, sizing her up. Finally, she said, “Sorry.”

“Wha…?” For a moment, Berta didn’t know why the woman was apologizing.

“You’re an attendant or something to that boy Yukinari, aren’t you? And here you’re stuck taking care of me.”

“I’m… I’m not his attendant. I’m a shrine maiden who’s been offered to Lord Yukinari.”

“A shrine maiden?” Veronika asked with a frown.

Someone who lived in the area probably would have surmised from that term that she was a human sacrifice who had been offered to an erdgod, and they’d know that erdgods were animals who had achieved intelligence through one means or another and become bound to the land.

“This… Yukinari. He’s a priest of some sort?”

“No, he’s the honored erdgod.”

“The erdgod? Him? A human?”

“Yes. Lord Yukinari often refers to himself as the ‘acting erdgod’… But for this town, and for me, he’s a very important person, and he is a god.”

Veronika seemed less than convinced, so Berta told her the story: how she had been offered as a sacrifice to the erdgod; how Yukinari had come and taken on the role of Friedland’s deity. Happy to have something she was able to talk about, Berta went into perhaps unnecessary detail as she related the tale.

“…And so, well, I’m the shrine maiden who’s been offered to Lord Yukinari. Although I admit I haven’t really been able to do my job properly yet…”

“Your job? I thought he wasn’t a man-eating monster?”

“That’s true. So *offering* myself to him can only mean, uh…” Her face was red.

Yukinari refused to treat Berta as property that had been given to him; instead, he was kind enough to treat her as a human being. She wasn’t suited to be food for him, obviously, and she had no special talents, so she thought perhaps she could at least give herself to him sexually. But Yukinari never came close to laying a hand on her. Thus, to this day Berta harbored a lingering anxiety that she was completely failing in her role as a shrine maiden.

Before she knew it, Berta had divulged even this to Veronika.

She had only wanted to help dispel the unpleasant atmosphere in the room, but it had led her to babble on about things Veronika probably didn't care to hear about. By the time she realized that, however, it was too late to take it back.

Veronika, for her part, didn't seem to feel she had been subjected to too much chatter.

"...True," Veronika said at length. Her tone was a touch more gentle than before. "Once you're used to living a certain way, it's hard to change. Very hard."

"Um, Miss... Veronika?" Berta blinked. But Veronika didn't seem inclined to say anything more; she lay back down on her bed and turned over, silently ending the conversation. She seemed to be saying that she was ready to go to sleep. Berta watched her for a moment.

"Sleep... Sleep well."

With that, she bowed once and then, as quietly as she could, walked out of the room.

Chapter Two: The Gathering Storm

Justin Chambers walked down the stairs to the basement, silent and alone.

He was the Dominus Doctrinae, the highest official in the True Church of Harris. Normally he wouldn't go anywhere unattended. But now, in the middle of the night, he headed for the basement by himself. Down to a facility that, officially, didn't exist. Those in the Church who might have seen him this way were very few. This place was something the Church—and the Dominus Doctrinae—had deliberately kept hidden throughout the generations.

"Hrgh…"

He pushed open the heavy metal door to the underground facility.

Where he was going had a very different atmosphere than where he was coming from. It was completely unadorned; instead, the walls were covered with shelves—so many of them that the walls literally couldn't be seen. The shelves were lined with a variety of items and tools. Some were made of metal, some of glass, others of resin, while still others were made of materials he couldn't identify. All of them were mysteries to Justin; he didn't even know what they were called, let alone how to use them.

Whatever they were, they didn't make one think of a religious building—certainly not the basement of the Great Cathedral. On the ceiling, along with the lamp that hung there for illumination, countless pipes were visible. Narrow ones and large ones, pipes that forked in different directions and others that joined together. Some were connected to spherical vessels, or square ones—other things Justin didn't understand.

Deep in the room stood the master of this place.

"Welcome to my laboratory," said the tall, thin woman, bowing.

She was perhaps just past twenty years old. Her fiery-red hair was tied back and tossed over her left shoulder. She wore a long black outfit, the chest open as if to invite attention. She didn't much look like someone who would be associated with a church. In fact, one could mistake her for a prostitute. At first glance, one certainly wouldn't guess that she was an alchemist—unless one saw her hands.

Her arms were covered in white gloves that reached to her elbows, with a complicated sigil on the back of the hand. It was a combination of a variety of symbols and letters—a "transmogrification circle" such as alchemists favored. The circle on her gloves was not actually practical; it was more of a blueprint, a measuring stick. But this was yet another thing Justin didn't know.

Yaroslava Vernak was the woman's name.

"You said you had something I would like to see," Justin said.

"And so I do. This way, please." Yaroslava gestured with an alluring smile. She indicated another door, this one made of wood. "Are you quite

ready, Your Holiness?" she asked. She was smiling as if she was about to pull a prank on him.

"Should I be?"

"Yes. I think you may find this a bit shocking."

Yaroslava had always been given to theatrics, but he sensed a gravity from her today that was unusual. "You've never done anything *but* shock me," Justin said with a wry smile. "What more do you threaten me with now?"

"Very well, Your Holiness," she said. "Look here, then."

She opened the door and ushered Justin inside.

A massive tank sat in the center of the room. It was filled with an opaque liquid the crimson color of blood—presumably some form of holy oil. It wasn't very wide; it had the dimensions and appearance of a coffin that had been propped up on its end.

"My most sincere apologies that I've kept you waiting," Yaroslava said. "Allow me to introduce you to the prototype of Vernak's 'angel.'"

She pulled on a chain that hung from the ceiling. There was a *ploop*, and a single bubble rose in the tube of holy oil. A moment later, a slow whirlpool formed and the water level began to drop. Apparently, she was draining the holy oil. As the liquid got lower and lower, the object hidden in the tube became visible.

"What's this…?" There was indeed a note of astonishment in Justin's voice. He had ordered Yaroslava to create a new, fourteenth angel, but he had expected it to take time. The angels had originally been the work of one particular family of alchemists kept by the previous Dominus, but when Jirina Urban, one of the descendants of that family, had been executed as an apostate, much of the art of creating the angels had been lost.

He had assumed that careful study of the records left by Jirina's family would eventually yield the ability to create angels just as good as theirs, but he had never imagined it would be a simple enough matter to complete in such a brief time. Or perhaps this was a testament to just how skilled Yaroslava was.

"This is an angel…?"

It had a pale body, a few flecks of crimson still clinging to it. It was sitting at the bottom of the tube of holy oil, facing away from them. Its form was willowy, the whole shape of its body described by flowing curves. It was immensely alluring. Even before one noticed the bulge of the chest, it was obvious this was a woman.

There were no female homunculi, no female angels. Or there hadn't been. But now…

It was the teaching of the True Church of Harris that the most fundamental form of the human body was male. Immediately after the creation of the world, the whole human race had consisted of just one man. This meant there was no fighting or anger amongst people, only one perfect entity, un-aging, undying: God's beloved child.

If the man had continued this way, the world might have been tedious, perhaps, but it would have been safe. But the man, it was said, succumbed to loneliness and boredom: imitating what God had done, he took a piece of his own flesh and made himself a companion—a woman. As a result, jealousy and rage entered the world, and people began to fight with each other. Encountering one who was like him and yet was not him, the man learned to compare himself to others. Humans could never again be pure.

This was why the Church saw women as lower than men: they were the source of original sin. Of course the all-important angels would be made only in the likeness of men.

"I suppose there's some reason you made this angel in the form of a woman."

"Of course," Yaroslava said with a knowing smile. "Two reasons, in fact. One is as a ploy against the Blue Angel. He obviously knows the True Church of Harris is after him, so he'll be on the lookout for male enemies. A female might just get past his guard."

This new Angel had been created specifically with the goal of destroying the thirteenth angel, called the Blue Angel or the Bluesteel Blasphemer. He would no doubt expect any angel sent after him to look like a man, so a female angel would have better luck getting close to him.

"And the other reason?"

"I believe we discussed that in order to fight the Blue Angel, the human soul at the core of this creation would not be removed."

The Church used its homunculi to perform miracles to help convert people; they were almost like walking advertisements. And an advertisement had no need of self-awareness or the ability to act autonomously. The angels were generally accompanied by someone whose job was to control them, to judge onlookers' reactions and dispense miracles accordingly.

The Bluesteel Blasphemer, however, retained his sense of self. This was the most threatening thing about him and the reason Jirina Urban had been executed for creating him.

The Blasphemer himself was not so superior to the other angels as such; in fact, their abilities were more or less the same. But with his sense of self, the Blasphemer didn't need to be given orders. When fighting another angel, he was immeasurably faster than a puppet that couldn't think or act on its own. The ability to assess the situation, choose a strategy, and carry it out was a matter of life and death on the battlefield.

If they sent enough units of the Missionary Order against him, they could almost certainly overwhelm him regardless of what his powers were. But that would be too public. The scandal of what was happening inside the Church might well get out.

For the sake of its reputation, the Church was desperate to deal with the Bluesteel Blasphemer secretly. That necessitated an assassin with abilities equal to his. And that meant creating an angel that hadn't been divested of

its core—of the human soul, with all its imperfections and memories, that rested at the center of its being.

To that end...

“I used a soul that was a woman in its previous world. If I had tried to force such a soul into a male body, it might have caused unnecessary complications. It would have been a gamble, and not a wise one. The confusion the soul felt might have prevented it from using its powers to the fullest, might even have caused it to go berserk. Then the Church would have another angel for an enemy, and matters would be much worse instead of much better.”

“I see your logic,” Justin said. He narrowed his eyes at the naked girl in the tube of holy oil. “And? Does it move yet?”

“It does. No problems at all.” Yaroslava gave a provocative smile and tapped on the glass of the tube. “Wake up. Wake up and greet your honored father.”

“Father...?” Justin seemed disturbed by this. Before him, the fourteenth angel opened its eyes. Its back, which had been resting against the glass, straightened up, and then it pushed against the bottom of the tube and rose without any hesitation in its movements. It approached the glass, beads of holy oil dripping from its long golden hair, and placed its palms against the inside of the tube.

“Fa...th...er...?” It looked at Justin in puzzlement. Its crimson eyes took in the bemused Dominus.

“Father?” Justin asked again. “What do you mean by that?”

“Does Your Holiness know the ingredients for a homunculus?” Yaroslava said, clearly enjoying herself.

“Ingredients...? No, I’m afraid I don’t know what this work entails.”

Of course, he wouldn’t. No outsider would know exactly what was involved in creating a homunculus, the quintessence of alchemy. Given that the angel was in a tube that had been full of holy oil just a moment ago, he might guess that holy oil had something to do with it. But little more.

“Of course you don’t. That’s only natural. Let me elucidate for you. One of the ingredients in a homunculus is human semen.”

“.....Erm.”

“You isolate the semen in a still and allow it to ferment. A transparent, human-shaped thing emerges. You provide it with some human blood each day, and a body begins to grow. That’s not all there is to it, but those are the basics.” Yaroslava licked her lips with her bright-red tongue. “Shall I tell you where I collected the semen from?”

“...Father.”

The newborn homunculus, showing no sign of understanding the conversation going on in front of it, continued to stare at Justin with its blood-red eyes.

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In the end, Berta was still at the Schillings mansion four days later.

They were still shorthanded, and Veronika hadn't yet gained the full trust of the people of Friedland, nor did she seem very willing to talk to anyone but Berta. Some argued that on the off chance Veronika were to turn violent, Berta would be completely useless, but given that three knights of the Missionary Order, including Arlen, hadn't been able to subdue the mercenary, it seemed impractical to station enough guards at her room to control her. And so Berta continued to look after Veronika.

Berta herself wasn't unhappy about this. With no special skills or vocation, she was pleased to be given work, to have something she could do. Only the fact that this meant spending days apart from Yukinari nagged at her.

"Um..."

Berta arrived at the guestroom with fresh bandages and a bucket of warm water. Veronika was just sitting up on her bed. It seemed the mercenary had known Berta was coming. Perhaps she had heard the girl's quiet footfalls, or had simply been able to sense her presence. Whatever the case, Berta had never seen Veronika sleeping defenselessly. Lying down with her eyes closed, yes, but Berta always knew somehow that at those moments, Veronika was still awake. Her impression was that Veronika was simply remaining calm to recover her strength.

"May I... change your bandages and, um... help you wash?"

This would be the fourth time already, but to Berta, Veronika still gave off the air of a wild beast, as if she might bite if she weren't handled carefully. This seemed to be Berta's misunderstanding.

"I'm sorry for the trouble," Veronika said apologetically.

"Okay, then..." Berta reached out a hand, but Veronika stopped her.

"No, it's all right, I'll undress myself." She removed her sleepwear. Since they were both women, there was no embarrassment, but due to her injuries, her movements were still hesitant.

"I'll take off the old bandages first," Berta said, removing the blood- and sweat-soaked wrappings. She was no doctor, and this was about the extent of what she could do, but after doing it every day for four days she was starting to get better at it. Slowly, taking care not to touch the wounds, she worked her way around Veronika's toned body.

It was so different from her own, she reflected. Berta was not fat by any means, but her muscles didn't stand out the way Veronika's did. Berta's skin was soft; press it with a finger and the finger would sink in slightly. Veronika's skin was taut; it would push back against a touch. It was the body of someone who had undergone a great deal of training. Somehow, it reminded Berta of a wild animal.

Scars marked the skin. Some newer, some older. Some large and some small. The scars were a silent testimony to the kind of life the woman had led.

Compared to Veronika, Berta felt she had been—not blessed, exactly, but that she had led a very quiet life. She had never even thought of fighting, of

doing battle with someone else. She never even really took the initiative to do anything, but always simply did as she was told. She couldn't help but feel that in Veronika's eyes, she must be an ugly and pitiful thing.

"The wounds have closed up, for the most part." Veronika was looking at the injuries under the bandages with strikingly untroubled eyes.

"Yes," Berta agreed, rolling up the old bandages and putting them in a bag. The wounds didn't show any sign of festering, and the swelling was finally starting to go down. As Veronika said, the next set of bandages probably wouldn't have any blood on them. She didn't seem to have any injuries to her internal organs, either, so a full recovery wasn't too far away.

"The cuts weren't that deep to begin with," Veronika said. "When the bleeding stops, that will be enough."

"Enough for what?" Berta was puzzled; it almost sounded as if Veronika didn't intend to heal any more than that.

Later, after Veronika had allowed her body to be wiped down and as Berta was applying new bandages, the mercenary said, almost as if it had just occurred to her:

"Thanks for everything."

"Oh, not at all... I'm sorry I haven't been able to do more for you."

"My friends are being held in Aldreil."

This was very sudden.

"Oh, um, other mercenaries...?"

"Yes, along with my employer. Until our contract ends, he's one of my friends, too." Veronika waited for Berta to finish applying the bandages, then stood up from the bed.

"Er, where are you—?"

"I'm going to rescue my friends." She sounded so casual about it that it took Berta a moment to understand what she meant.

"Wha? But—"

"Thank you again. You have my gratitude. Kindly tell me where my weapon is being kept."

Berta couldn't speak immediately. She opened and closed her mouth several times before finally saying, "I—I know your wounds are better, but... It's still too soon to—" She realized on some level that she wasn't quite addressing Veronika's concern.

Veronika wanted to go to Aldreil. The city the Missionary Order was using as a base. There were probably more than two hundred knights there, along with those awful machines—statues of the guardian saint, three of them at least. It wasn't possible to challenge them alone. It was a more fundamental issue than whether her wounds would stay closed. Even if she had been in perfect health, Veronika would have been killed.

But...

"I'm tired," she said, looking at Berta, "of leaving people behind."

So she'd had to leave people behind before. Veronika had a far-off look in her eyes, as if Aldreil had something particular to do with that.

“But… But…” Berta couldn’t get the words out.

She couldn’t let Veronika go. But she had no hope of changing the mercenary’s mind, let alone physically stopping her. She was just a helpless little girl, not fit to do more than some simple chores. If she were smarter, maybe she could have persuaded Veronika with a clever word or two. The thought pained her.

What should I do?

As Berta stood there, flustered—

“Berta, how are Veronika’s wounds looking?”

There was a knock on the door, and a voice. Just as Berta registered that it was the voice of the master she was meant to serve, he came in without waiting for an answer.

Yukinari stood in the doorway. Which was where he froze.

For a second, Berta didn’t know why, but then she looked at Veronika and understood. Veronika was still undressed. She had a lone undergarment wrapped around her waist, but her upper body and her legs were covered by not a thread. This was so the sweat could be wiped from her body.

Veronika didn’t seem to expect that she would suddenly be confronted with Yukinari while all but naked; she sat there speechless, eyes wide. She was too shocked even to cover her shapely chest with her arms.

“Erk! I-I’m s-sorry!” In a panic, Yukinari spun around so his back was to the girls. Berta noticed that his ears were red. He had seemed unmoved when Berta had attempted to “serve” him in the bath, but now he was clearly agitated.

Berta found herself thinking that she was a little jealous, which was perhaps not quite what the situation warranted. Was this the allure of a grown woman?

“Yuki?”

Dasa and Ulrike appeared in the doorway. They peeked into the room, where they saw Veronika, who had finally regained the presence of mind to cover herself.

“……Yuki.”

Dasa narrowed her eyes behind her glasses. On the other hand...

"Oh! I see you are mostly healed."

Because the other girl was the familiar of a plant-based erdgod, effectively a part of that deity, her thinking was not always quite in line with that of an ordinary human. Right now, despite the nearly naked Veronika and the red-faced Yukinari, she seemed to be focused on the state of Veronika's injuries.

"U-Um, this— This isn't— It—" Berta hurried to defend Yukinari, but she couldn't quite think of what to say.

"Her chest?" Dasa asked, with an angry expression.

Indeed, Veronika was noticeably more well-endowed than Dasa or Ulrike. The muscles that ran from just under her nipples to her belly button were so toned as to appear to emphasize her chest and rear.

Yukinari, too, came back to himself and exclaimed, "Wait! This isn't what it looks like! It's just an accident!"

"...Something to aspire to."

Dasa didn't appear to be listening to Yukinari, but had a hand to her own chest. As far as Berta knew, Yukinari had never been any more forward with Dasa than he was with her. Maybe he just preferred more mature women.

But my chest...

There, at least, she felt she held her own. Maybe there was something more to it than bust size.

As Berta was mulling this over, Veronika heaved a sigh. She almost had a dry grin on her face, as if something within her had relaxed. Maybe, faced with the easy banter of Yukinari and his friends, the heroic but ultimately tragic resolve in her heart had fallen away.

She no longer looked as if she were about to run. Berta let out a quiet, relieved breath.

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Veronika folded her borrowed sleepwear and placed it on top of her bed, then changed into the clothes she traveled and fought in. She wasn't startled to find that the blood-stained outfit had been washed, but the way the small tears had been fixed and the places where she had been stabbed repaired was frankly surprising. Berta must have done it. It couldn't be called skillful work, even in flattery, but she had clearly taken care with it. Now that Veronika thought about it, she remembered Berta, unable to bear sitting with her in silence, working on some kind of sewing...

"Um..."

"My dagger."

"...Right."

Veronika held out her hand, and Berta obediently gave her the short blade. She still appeared to be against the idea of Veronika going to Aldreil, but didn't seem to have any intent of trying to stop her with little tricks like hiding her clothing or refusing to let her have her equipment. She

practically seemed uncomfortable with the idea of holding onto somebody else's possessions.

She was a good young woman, Veronika suspected.

"Sorry, can I get a glass of water?"

"Oh, s-sure," Berta nodded and left the room carrying a basket with the used bandages. Veronika had a feeling that once she was ready to go, Berta would try to stop her again—so she created a pretext to get the girl out of the way.

Somewhat to her surprise, when she opened the dresser drawer, she found all of her equipment and possessions except her halberd. Perhaps they hadn't expected her to try to run away, or had assumed she wouldn't have the strength. Or maybe... Maybe they'd simply trusted her. To judge by Berta, this seemed the most likely.

Veronika left the guestroom without a word—but, for some reason, some emotion tugged at her, calling her back.

She was heading for the reception room. She'd never left her room while she was recuperating, but these kinds of buildings—the manors of local lords and authorities—were all fairly similar, so it wasn't too hard to guess where her destination was.

She was not, of course, fully recovered yet. But she was well enough that she had no trouble walking around. As Berta had said, running or jumping would open the wounds again, but she couldn't worry about that for now.

"...Excuse me. Could I have a minute?" she asked as she arrived at the reception room.

Inside, Yukinari, Dasa, and Fiona, who seemed to be the master of this household, were discussing something. The three of them looked at Veronika. Fiona seemed surprised to see her wearing her traveling clothes, but Yukinari and Dasa showed no change in their expressions. Were they not startled? Or had they simply suspected this might happen?

"There's something I'd like to talk about," Veronika said.

"Have a seat," Fiona said, gesturing to an empty chair beside her. "I assume it's nothing simple. Mind if we come to a stopping point in our conversation first?"

"Go right ahead," Veronika said, nodding, and sat down next to Fiona.

"Oh..." Yukinari said, and there was a long pause before he went on, "Sorry about, uh, earlier." He scratched his cheek in embarrassment.

"It doesn't bother me. But I accept your apology," Veronika said.

Mercenary work was a man's world, and it took her to all kinds of places. It wouldn't have been very practical for her to constantly request a separate room or a curtain every time she had to change clothes. Even so, her subordinates had insisted on trying to afford her special treatment. She was grateful for their consideration, but in a way, it also pained her. In any event, Veronika was not such an amateur as to worry about an accidental glance.

"All right, Yukinari, go on," Fiona said.

“Sure. Like I was saying, I’d like to try to make Ulrike’s suggestion work. And what’s more… Considering how things are likely to go, we may need a weapon that can deal with enemies at long range.”

He pointed to a map laid out on the desk. In addition to the map, there was a simple sketch of some kind. To Veronika, it looked like a slingshot. But there was a person drawn next to it—and if it was to scale, the slingshot was large enough to be a siege weapon. What exactly were these three planning?

“Long range? Don’t the guns you and Dasa use have that covered?”

“I think you may be getting the wrong idea,” Yukinari frowned. “Guns aren’t all-powerful weapons with an unlimited range. They can shoot farther than a bow and arrow, sure, but their power drops off dramatically after a certain distance, and above all the accuracy decreases until it’s impossible to hit anything.” Yukinari nodded at the sword—no, the sword-like weapon—propped up next to his chair.

Veronika squinted at it. *Gun* seemed to be what the weapon was called.

It was extremely powerful. The one Dasa had was presumably the same type of thing. The weapon had roared and knocked the sword out of Veronika’s hand—and when she had looked at the sword earlier, when changing, she found that it had been neatly broken in the middle.

Admittedly, it was a relatively cheap sword, but it shouldn’t have been so easy to destroy. She had used it in combat many times. That meant one blow from a “gun” was far more powerful than a swordsman’s strike.

It seemed to be some kind of ranged arm, but it was more portable than a bow or crossbow and could be used even while cutting with the sword part of the weapon. If she had one of those, it would be very useful in rescuing her companions—her subordinates.

“That’s true,” Fiona was saying. “The people who have borrowed your Durandalls report that it’s very hard to hit a small target…”

“Right. So you deliberately sacrifice some mobility for greater accuracy at a greater distance. You give it a long, thick barrel for improved precision, load it up with plenty of powder so the bullet can travel a long distance, and then you fit it with a scope—er, think of it as a sort of telescope. That’s a sniper rifle.”

Veronika silently raised an eyebrow. They were talking about weapons, obviously, but the number of words she had never heard before made it difficult to follow. Perhaps this young man, Yukinari, was a weaponsmith. On the frontier, it was common to see strange weapons that had developed in isolation. Judging by the way this one had broken her sword, it had an exceptional amount of power for something an individual could carry. Enough that, in the right circumstances, it might be able to turn the tide of a battle.

Yet it seemed Yukinari was saying that even this “gun” would not be enough. He was planning to build something even more powerful.

“So what was it you wanted my advice on?” Fiona asked.

“Sniper rifles are more about accuracy than anything else. So, naturally, you need some test shots both to confirm the accuracy and so the sniper—the person using the gun—can get better at it. I wondered if you could think of anywhere that might be good for that kind of practice. I would hate to be out in the mountains and accidentally hit a passerby or something.”

“What kind of place are you thinking of?”

“Someplace where you can get out to a distance even a bow and arrow couldn’t cover, with no obstacles between the shooter and the target. Somewhere people don’t usually go. We can’t use anywhere in town, so it would have to be outside.”

“What about the observation platform that used to be used for the sacrifices to the erdgod?” Fiona suggested. “It’s a pretty good distance from the sanctuary. And because it was used to observe the progress of the ritual, there’s nothing in between it and the target.”

“Yeah, I see. I hadn’t thought about that.” Yukinari nodded, a note of admiration in his voice. “And people mostly steer clear of the sanctuary. As long as we’re careful, it’d be fine.”

“Yeah. If you’re still uncomfortable with it, we could set specific dates and times and tell the townspeople to keep away during those times.”

“Good call. Let’s do that.” Yukinari sounded pleased.

This caused Veronika to take another look at Yukinari’s “gun.” This weapon had enough power to unilaterally attack an enemy from a distance, even demolish a sword. It could probably pierce plate armor without trouble. There was no question: if she took one of those to Aldreil, her chances of rescuing her friends would improve immensely.

Was there some way for her to obtain one of these weapons? Taking it by force was an option, but she did owe these people something, and theft would have its own difficulties. She didn’t know how to use the gun, for example. That meant the safest and quickest thing to do would be to negotiate. Then they could teach her how to use it.

“U-Um!” As Veronika was thinking about this, Berta rushed into the parlor, seeming flustered about something.

“I’m sorry to interrupt, but I can’t find Miss Veroni—”

She stopped when she saw Veronika sitting in the room. She let out a long sigh and slumped to the ground where she was. She must have panicked when she came back with the water only to find Veronika wasn’t in her room.

“What are you so frantic about?” Yukinari asked.

Berta didn’t stand up as she replied, “I— You— Lord Yukinari! Miss Fiona! You have to stop Miss Veronika! Her wounds aren’t even healed, but she wants to leave Friedland and go back to Aldreil... She says she wants to help her friends!”

“I see,” Yukinari said, looking at Veronika. “I hate to tell you this, but that’s impossible. Berta’s right. I sympathize with wanting to rescue your friends, but there were two or three full units of the Missionary Order in

Aldreil. You wouldn't stand a chance against them alone. You'd just be throwing your life away."

Throwing your life away. Yukinari hadn't thought very hard about what he was saying, but his words hit close to Veronika's heart.

"You've been here, what, four or five days? If the Missionary Order planned to execute your friends, they'd have done it by now. If not, they'll keep your comrades alive. There's no reason you have to go immediately. Right?"

"Well..." Veronika didn't know what to say. Yukinari's logic was sound. If the missionaries were going to put her friends to death, they would have carried out the sentence already, and if not, there was no reason everyone wouldn't be able to survive a little longer. The Missionary Order of the True Church of Harris as Veronika understood it was ruthless, but not brutal. Or rather, they had a pronounced respect for principle. They would even slaughter women and children if they thought it was necessary, but they wouldn't murder captives for no reason.

If she was going to fight, she should make sure she had every advantage she could gain. And that meant...

"I understand. Looks like I'll be imposing on you a little longer."

Yukinari looked a touch befuddled. He had given Veronika his opinion, as Berta had asked, but he hadn't expected her to acquiesce so easily. In reality, if the gun didn't exist, Veronika would probably have made for Aldreil regardless of how correct Yukinari's logic was.

"But while I'm here," Veronika said, "as long as I'm already bothering you, I have a request."

"A request?"

"Please, lend me that 'gun' of yours. Along with the 'sni-per ri-fle' you were discussing earlier, if possible."

If there was a stronger gun with a longer range available, then by all means, she wanted one.

Veronika wasn't offering to buy the guns. She was really asking that they simply give them to her. She understood it was a tremendous leap and was fully prepared to be turned down. But...

"Okay," Yukinari nodded, catching her by surprise.

●

Angela and the other missionaries were using the mansion of Aldreil's mayor for their administrative office. The previous occupants of the house, including the mayor, had been chased off to a separate residence so that the Order could base itself out of the biggest building in town.

In order to protect the squadron's classified information, none of the townspeople were allowed inside, not even the mayor. That was the reason they gave publicly, anyway, but in fact Angela had recommended this measure to the captain to prevent the ugly sight of would-be toadies getting close.

The building was made chiefly of stone, a sturdy structure worthy of the leader of a major trade town. The image suited the missionary knights well; the sight of them going in and out gave it the forbidding air of a castle.

The mayor's study became the captain's office. The reception room became the assembly room where the captains and vice captains of each unit met. The whole character of the house changed based solely on its occupants.

Angela was satisfied that she'd made a good recommendation.

"Reporting, ma'am!"

One of the missionaries approached the office where Angela was waiting. At the moment, Captain Bateson was recuperating in the mayor's former bedroom, so as vice captain, Angela had responsibility for the Ninth Missionary Brigade. She was honored to take on this position, but the need to constantly be giving instructions meant she was forever waiting in this office.

She wanted to go out on patrol again, but the other knights stopped her, and she ended up sitting here. Partly this was just because she had so many visitors, but also, many were on edge after Bateson's stabbing.

"About the mercenaries," the knight was saying. "One of them appears to have escaped us, but only one."

"Mercenaries? Ah... yes.." She frowned for a moment before it came back to her.

Shortly after Angela and the Ninth Missionary Brigade had arrived in Aldreil, they'd apprehended a merchant and his hired bodyguards doing business without either permission from the kingdom or the approval of the Harris Church. They were currently locked up in the basement of this very manor, previously a storage area. The knights had been performing an interrogation.

"One escaped? In *those* circumstances?" Angela muttered, frowning again. "I wonder if it was good fortune, or cowardice."

She thought for a moment that perhaps this mercenary had simply abandoned the others and fled. But the information had surfaced a little too slow to concern a faithless companion. If this was only now coming to light, it meant the others had been enduring the interrogation in an attempt to cover for the one who ran.

"He can't be uninjured," the knight said.

"All the more impressive he escaped, then," Angela said. "Practically praiseworthy. But I assume he became dinner for some animal long before he reached any human settlement."

"A distinct possibility, ma'am," the knight replied, standing perfectly still.

"I wonder, though. Have you ever known a mercenary—disgusting creatures—to endure an interrogation simply to cover for one of their own? Their employer I could understand, but mercenaries regard each other as

expendable. Yet here, a whole group of them has conspired to let one of their number escape."

In other words, perhaps they only *looked* like mercenaries.

If this person was merely the remnant of a defeated group of hired thugs, there was no need to chase him down. But if not...

"Interesting. Let's pursue him. I think five or six knights should be more than enough to find one person. The demigods and xenobeasts around here have been taken care of. It would be too much to mobilize the entire unit. You choose the men. Prepare weapons and horses. I'll lead the effort personally."

"Personally, Vice Captain?"

"Yes. Of course, he may already be dead, but I should be there to make sure. The Ninth Brigade can hardly set off to its next destination with the captain still recovering. I won't go so far as to call this a way of killing time, but let's say it will help me take my mind off my anxiety about the future."

The Ninth Missionary Brigade had been intending to resupply in Aldreil, then continue farther into the frontier as a Civilizing Expedition. But with the captain unexpectedly incapacitated, their hands were tied. Ideally, again, Angela would remain in this office in place of their leader. But, also again, she was getting sick of it.

"Now, as to the question of where he might have gone..."

She had a rough mental map of the area. Places that were relatively close—within three or four days' journey—included Maysford, Friedland, and maybe Enlendila.

"Come to think of it, wasn't the Sixth Brigade dispatched to Friedland?" she muttered. She pictured someone else who had entered the Order the same time she had: Arlen Lansdowne.

●

Truth be told, Yukinari didn't know much about very many kinds of guns. In his previous world, he had owned models of the Winchester M92 and the Sturm Ruger Super Blackhawk, the weapons that had formed the basis for Durandall and Red Chili, respectively. He had disassembled and reassembled them so many times that he knew their every piece by heart.

These two guns—a lever-action carbine and a single-action revolver—were also of fairly simple construction, with relatively few parts. The basic form of both had been established in the nineteenth century, so they didn't require the micron-precise accuracy of manufacturing demanded by modern weapons. That was why Yukinari had been able to produce working replicas after just a few tries and drawing on his own memory.

But he had never owned a model sniper rifle.

He had the broad knowledge, but he didn't know exactly what went into the construction of such a gun. He had looked at a blueprint in a magazine once, but that was nowhere near enough to allow him to create an entire weapon from scratch.

That meant the only real option was to adapt the guns he did know for sniper work.

Lever-action guns and revolvers are not actually well suited to sniping. Lever-action carbines are built to accept cylindrical magazines, with the rounds loaded horizontally. That makes it impossible to load the sharp-tipped bullets used by a precision rifle—if you were so careless as to try, they might explode in the chamber. As for revolvers, the magazine passes through the chamber, so there are absolute limits to how accurate it can be and still revolve.

And these were guns Yukinari had once owned models of. When it came to everything else...

"Well, hope it works," he muttered, standing on top of the observation platform. In his hand was a prototype sniper rifle he'd produced. It was completely different, though, from what most people in Yukinari's previous world would have imagined when they heard the words "sniper rifle." It had the long barrel, of course, but the mechanical form and function were different.

First and foremost, it was two barrels lined up side by side.

"I guess a derringer and a sniper rifle are pretty much polar opposites."

In terms of form the gun was, essentially, divided into two parts: upper and lower. One bullet was loaded into each part, and using a ratchet, the upper and lower bullets could be fired in succession, allowing two shots between reloads. After that, the empty cartridges would have to be ejected and new ones loaded in.

He based this design on the Remington Double Derringer, a small pistol commonly hidden in boots or pockets. That model gun, he had owned. It was an extremely simple design, and therefore he could have confidence in it; because the barrel and the chamber were a single piece, it was comparatively easy to build with a high degree of precision.

The reason he hadn't made it a single-shot weapon was in the hopes that if the sniper missed their first shot, being able to fire another immediately might allow them to hit what they were aiming for. Some shotguns were also divided into top and bottom this way, but as far as Yukinari knew, no similar sniper rifle existed. The existence of the standard bolt-action configuration probably rendered it unnecessary.

He had dubbed the gun Derrringer.

The man who had invented the derringer pistol was, in fact, named Deringer, with one *r*. Many who produced similar weapons called them derringers, adding an *r* to avoid trademark problems. Since Yukinari had borrowed that design for this weapon, he decided to add yet another *r*.

Now he stood in silence. Dasa was behind him, as was Veronika, who had shown much interest in the rifle. Berta was there, too. Ulrike had offered to come along at first, but he'd had a separate task for her.

The observation platform, as we've established, was originally for the purpose of observing the ritual to the erdgod. Nobody would live around

here, and it had only even been used once every few years. It was topped by a tiny hut, just barely enough to keep out the elements, giving the platform the appearance of a poor man's guard tower.

"Okay, here we go." Yukinari braced Derrringer against the mound of earth he had piled up. This was just a prototype, so he hadn't made a bipod. He had to lean the gun against something like this to keep it steady enough to shoot with.

Yukinari went to one knee and put his eye to the scope. Everything was ready. The area around the sanctuary looked good. He could see Ulrike, just where they'd discussed. Near the sanctuary was an open area much like a public square. Ulrike was peeking out from a grove of trees just next to it.

A strange thing stood in the square, roughly the shape of a giant person. It was a log, covered in branches until it suggested the correct shape. Ulrike's part had been to create and now to maintain this target, as well as to confirm when it was hit. This was why she wasn't up on the observation platform with the others.

"Dasa, give the signal."

"...Mn." She fired Red Chili once into the air.

This was the signal to begin. The sound of Red Chili warned Ulrike to keep to the trees. Two shots in a row meant they were taking a short break.

Silently, Yukinari eyeballed the cross scratched onto the inside of the scope and lined it up with the doll. He held his breath—and took the first shot.

Boom.

The noise echoed around the area, an order of magnitude louder than Red Chili. Durandall and Red Chili used .44 Magnum bullets, powerful ammunition for a handgun, but they simply didn't have as much powder as the rounds used in a rifle.

But...

"Miss," Yukinari said quietly. It was impossible even for Yukinari to follow a bullet going faster than the speed of sound with his naked eye, but he saw a cloud of dust rise up to the right of the target.

"Hrm," he grunted. He hadn't just missed a specific small area, like the head or the heart; he hadn't managed to land a hit anywhere on the human figure.

The second shot—missed again.

For the sake of interest, he aimed in the same place he had before, but once again the bullet landed to the right. It was in the same spot as the previous shot, which meant the gun itself was delivering the rounds accurately.

There was the effect of wind and humidity to consider. But if he couldn't hit anything, the weapon was useless. He would have to fire dozens of

rounds, improve his aim, gain experience understanding the wind and whatever other factors came into play.

"You want to try, Dasa?" He looked back at his partner, who had been watching patiently. She wasn't able to join him on the front lines of battle, which made the rifle all the more important to her. "I'm warning you, though, it's not easy."

"Just watch... me." She had the hint of a knowing smile on her face. Although to everyone but Yukinari, she probably looked as expressionless as ever.

The platform Yukinari had constructed was a little high for Dasa, so she sat on a nearby chair to work the gun. She tried several different positions before she found something she liked. Satisfied, she looked through the scope, picked her aim, and pulled the trigger.

Her first shot.

Yukinari pulled out a backup scope and looked through it to see where the bullet went. The human figure was still intact. Apparently, she had missed.

From close range, Dasa could hit Veronika's sword with a quick draw, but even she found long-distance sniping to be another matter. It only made sense.

She aimed. Her second shot. It, too, missed.

"...Hrm."

Dasa pulled the lever to release the stopper, angling the gun downward as she opened the stock, removing the spent rounds and inserting new ones. She closed the stock and prepared to fire Derrringer once more.

"Mn....."

She furrowed her brow just behind her glasses. The gun was, perhaps, just a little bit difficult for her to handle. This was precisely the reason such vertically split-stock sniper rifles didn't exist in Yukinari's previous world. In order to open the stock, which opened downward, empty the chamber and insert a new round, it was necessary to remove one's eye from the scope. This also necessarily involved a major movement of the gun itself, meaning one's aim would be greatly thrown off. Hence, each time one had to get back on the scope and aim afresh in order to shoot again.

A bipod could be attached in order to stabilize it, as with Red Chili, but then it would be more difficult to load and unload the chamber. The reason vertical twin-barrel arrangements like this, as well as lever-action devices like Durandall, were not used for sniper rifles was because operating them required an open space underneath the gun, making them unsuited for mounting on bipods.

When Dasa opened the stock of the gun to load and reload, she tried her best to prevent the barrel from moving too much—but being used to Red Chili, she no doubt found it annoying to have to do this. Her handgun was of a completely different construction, but she had been by Yukinari's side all

the while he was making Derrringer, so she already had a good idea of how it worked. Even so…

She said nothing as her third shot missed.

“Hmm. I guess it is pretty tough.” Yukinari thought it was enough to get a rough feel for the weapon today. He took a step toward Dasa, intending to ask what she thought of it, but she fired again. And missed.

Eject.

Load.

Fire—Miss.

Fire another round immediately—Miss.

Eject.

Load.

Fire—Miss.

Fire another round immediately—Miss.

“E-Erm, Dasa…?”

She was like a broken machine, repeating the same actions over and over. And she was completely silent. She was always taciturn, but now the heat almost seemed to be rising off of her. It was a little scary.

“It’s more… dif…ficult than I thought.”

Finally, when she had fired nearly thirty rounds, she stepped away from the weapon. Her expression was perhaps thirty percent more disappointed than usual. Something, again, perceptible only to Yukinari.

She seemed to be angry. To fire so many shots and not have a single one hit must have been frustrating. She was always so serious; when she couldn’t do what she set out to do, it unsettled her. And sniper work was something she had learned to do after gaining her sight. It was the proof that she could see, and a special skill of hers. It was, in her own way, important to her to be an accomplished distance shooter.

“Well, it’s a prototype,” Yukinari said, hoping to placate her. He recalled something he’d read in a book in his previous world: a good sniper never missed his first shot.

But, the book continued, with humans there was no such thing as never. So if you missed that first shot, you had to try to land the second one before your target hid. If the target was holed up somewhere with a hostage, a botched first shot might even cause the target to kill the hostage, so it was crucial to be able to get in that second shot immediately.

Regardless, people who were shaken when they missed their shot or let it put them in a bad mood were unsuited for sniper work. Of course, if he pointed this out, it would only make Dasa even angrier, so he kept his mouth shut.

“May I try it?” Veronika, who had been standing quietly by until then, spoke up. Since she had seemed interested in the weapon, she had probably just been waiting until Yukinari and Dasa finished trying it out.

“Sure, I don’t mind,” Yukinari said, and handed her Derrringer.

“How do I…?”

She had never fired a gun before. He gave her a quick rundown. Veronika had, however, been watching the two of them do their trial runs, so she only needed a few details before she grasped how it worked. First she loaded it, cocked the hammer, then fired and ejected the round—or rather, pretended to, doing it all without a bullet, but there were no problems.

She was a quick study. But...

"...Hrm."

She still missed.

She fired a second time, then reloaded, firing shots three and four. In the end she shot ten times, but none of them hit the target.

"And to think, I'm pretty good with a bow," she said with a disappointed frown.

Veronika was very confident in her martial abilities, and it bothered her not to have hit the target even once, although less so than it did Dasa. Bows and guns are completely different, though, so Yukinari didn't find this especially strange.

Ultimately, between the three of them, not a single shot had landed. It wasn't encouraging.

Still, in a total of fifty shots, there had been no misfires; the gun itself seemed to be functioning smoothly. The actual workings of the device were more than satisfactory. The spread of the bullets wasn't even very large. That seemed to suggest that the problem was less accuracy than it was the level of proficiency and suitability of the shooter.

"Maybe practice makes perfect, huh...?" Yukinari muttered, getting ready to pack up.

"You want to try it?"

It was Veronika who had spoken, and she was holding Derrringer out to a very startled Berta.

"Wha?! M-Me?!"

She clearly had not been expecting to be involved in this situation in any way.

"U-Um, Lord Yukinari?" She looked to him for rescue.

"Well, as long as we're up here, why not?" Yukinari said with a grin.

They had just a few bullets left. There was no sense saving them. If they ran out, Yukinari could simply make more with his powers.

"I-If you say so, L-Lord Yukinari..." With that, Berta reluctantly took the gun from Veronika. She staggered slightly; perhaps it was heavier than she'd expected. Yukinari caught her by the shoulder.

"You okay?"

"Oh, yes, I... I'll manage. Th-Thank you." Her face was red. He seated her, like Dasa, on the chair, and gave her a simple tutorial on how to shoot. Her movements, of course, were much more hesitant than Dasa's.

"Okay, try it," Yukinari said, and then he waited.

Truth be told, Yukinari was very interested to see Berta shoot, although not for the same reasons as the others. He himself was usually out in front in battle, so it was natural that he would leave the sniping to somebody else. He had considered recruiting one of Arlen's comrades for the role, but he wasn't confident he could count on their help if it came to a fight against other missionaries. At some point, he might even have to confiscate their Durandalls again.

He could turn one of the townspeople into a sniper, then. In that case, he wouldn't be dealing with someone like Dasa, who already knew how to handle a gun, nor even with someone like Veronika, who was accomplished in battle. If he had Berta, with no experience whatsoever of weaponry, try shooting, it might give him some ideas for how to make the sniper rifle more user-friendly for "amateurs" like her.

That was what he was expecting, anyway.

Until the boom.

"Good, you were able to shoot it. Now, first—"

He was going to ask her how it felt, using a gun for the first time in her life. But Berta blinked and said, "I... I hit it."

"You what?" Startled, Yukinari grabbed his scope and looked toward the sanctuary.

There was a hole in the head of the doll.

"I don't be...lieve it," Dasa said. She was looking through the scope on Red Chili to see what had happened. She gave a quiet gurgle, presumably inspired by the sight of Berta's successful shot.

"Um, I— Um—" Berta was looking at Yukinari and Dasa anxiously. She was starting to worry that she had done something wrong.

"Berta," Yukinari said, doubting his own eyes, "do it again. Just try it."

“Wha? Um, sure. R-Right now…?” She put her eye back to Derrringer’s scope.

Then she fired.

This time she appeared to have missed. Maybe the first shot had been lucky, or maybe the second had been thrown off because of her surprise at Yukinari’s reaction.

“Oh, it missed,” Berta said, actually sounding relieved. There was none of the regret that Dasa had shown. It wasn’t so much that Berta had an inherently calm demeanor, she just wasn’t as buffeted by her emotions.

Still, Yukinari looked through his scope to check where the bullet had landed. She had missed, all right. But luck had nothing to do with it.

The second shot had gone almost exactly where the first had. And because the human figure was swaying slightly with the impact of the first shot, the second one would have been an order of magnitude harder.

“That’s really something,” Yukinari said. If the figure had been intact, like it was when she took the first shot, she might have hit it.

“Th-Thank... you...”

Berta still didn’t seem to understand the import of what she had done; she just seemed a little embarrassed. Maybe she was happy to be praised by Yukinari.

Well, this is unexpected, Yukinari thought.

Sniping requires patience. You have to sit and wait, still as a stone, for one precise instant to arrive. It was almost the exact opposite of a sword battle, in which you moved and sliced, trying to create an opening. Nor was it quite the same as trying to hit a moving target in close-distance combat. Your enemy was less your opponent than yourself.

Could Berta have a talent for this?

He looked afresh at the shrine maiden who had been offered to him. She was staring in perplexity at Derrringer, still perched on the mound of earth.

●

The testing session over, Yukinari and the others returned to Friedland to let Fiona know the results. After they’d eaten, they went back to the sanctuary.

Yukinari said thank you to Ulrike, who had been waiting there, and soon set up shop in the living area as usual, breaking down Derrringer. Unlike Durandall and Red Chili, which were used in largely the same way as the guns he had modeled them on, with this new one he was trying to adapt a derringer, a small handgun, to sniper use—an inherently ridiculous idea. There was a distinct possibility that parts of it would break under stress, or that other problems might emerge. He was just checking to see that everything was in good working order.

He checked not only the Derrringer they had used for shooting that day, but also the various spare parts he had prepared, making sure nothing was

warped or damaged. If everything looked all right, he planned to create three Derrringers, for more efficient shooting practice.

“Doesn’t look like there are any problems,” he muttered, looking at the parts of the weapon spread out on a cloth.

For such a large gun, there were surprisingly few pieces. The largest part was the barrel, followed by the stock, then the mechanical frame, and finally the grip. Not counting the scope, there were hardly thirty parts, of which about a third were springs or screws.

“Maybe I should attach a rail or something, to make it easier to test-fire later…?” he said to himself as he set about producing the new guns. Beside him, Veronika was watching with interest. She had come to the sanctuary with Berta, who was worried that the cleaning and cooking and washing there might not get done without her. Hence she had suggested she return briefly, at which point Veronika volunteered that she would come, too. She was interested in the guns, yes, but above all, she seemed to want to see Yukinari “play god.”

“……So,” Yukinari said as he began working on the second Derrringer. “Was there something you wanted to talk about?”

“A sniper rifle, you called this?” Veronika shifted so she was looking at him. “This ‘Derrringer’… You said you made it as an experiment. That you didn’t know how it would handle. So your ‘Durandall’ that you normally use, does it handle better?”

“A little bit, I guess,” he said after a moment’s thought.

The truth was, of the three weapons he had made—Durandall, Red Chili, and Derrringer—by far the easiest to use offensively was Durandall.

Red Chili, as a small pistol, might look simple, but pistols are harder to aim than rifles or carbines. Their smaller size makes the aim less steady. That’s why, in many of the armies of ages past, pistols were carried by officers for their own protection, while the basic weapon used in combat was a small rifle.

Yukinari had initially designed Red Chili for Dasa’s personal protection, thinking he would make something small enough to fit in her bag. He had never imagined she would use it in as many situations as she did.

“Give me a Durandall, then,” Veronika said. “Along with as many… ‘bullets,’ did you call them? As many bullets as possible, if you can.”

“Still set on going back to Aldreil?” Yukinari asked, not looking up from his work.

“Yes.”

“To help your friends?”

“Yes.” Her answers came without hesitation.

Yukinari was silent for a moment, then asked, “…What will you do if they’re already dead?”

“Avenge them.” Again Veronika’s reply was immediate. “That’s another reason why I need a weapon. My sword is smashed beyond use,” she said pointedly.

“When you put it that way, it’s hard to refuse,” Yukinari said with a grin. It was Dasa who had broken Veronika’s sword, but her actions could, in principle, be considered the responsibility of her guardian, Yukinari.

“Will you try to stop me, too?”

“…I don’t know,” Yukinari said.

It was easy to say that revenge solves nothing, but Yukinari was hardly in a position to lecture someone else on that point. When Jirina was killed, he had gone on a murderous rampage against members of the Harris Church. He hadn’t even counted the number of his victims; to this day, he didn’t know how many he had killed. If Jirina hadn’t asked him to take care of Dasa, he would probably have stayed in the capital, slaughtering everyone associated with the Church until he ran out of strength.

“Revenge,” he mused. “Vengeance… It’s not exactly productive.” He almost could have been talking to himself.

Revenge satisfies only oneself. If you place yourself above all else, then vengeance can be meaningful, but you have nothing concrete to gain by it. Absolutely nothing. It takes time and energy. Or at least, so Yukinari thought. He felt it all the more keenly because he was thinking it at this moment.

“The fact that you’re prepared to die for it, it’s—how do I put this? Dangerous. To die just trying to satisfy yourself… It seems pointless.”

“Satisfy myself?” Veronika raised an eyebrow. “I’m not crazy enough to do something like that just for my own amusement.”

“But what other purpose does it serve? You don’t get any reward for it, and it’s not like your friends who are already dead are going to be happy about it… I guess you could say it doesn’t have any practical benefit.”

“No practical benefit? Hmm…” Veronika seemed intrigued by this; she looked from Derrringer to Yukinari. “Yukinari, what country were you born in? How were you raised?”

“What’s this all of a sudden?” Yukinari stopped what he was doing and looked at Veronika.

“Don’t be upset, just listen to me. You seem to have been brought up very well. Somewhere peaceful, I assume, a country under wise rule…”

Yukinari looked at her, puzzled.

“It’s just common sense,” Veronika said. “If you don’t fight, your opponent will have contempt for you. All the more so if there’s no reward for fighting. That’s how humans are. Revenge very much has a benefit; it prevents the next tragedy from occurring. It says, *if you hurt us, you’ll pay for it*. If the other side knows you’re strong, they won’t be so eager to attack you next time.”

“That’s…”

“I agree with you, it’s better to live in peace without fighting. But if you refuse to shed blood to obtain that, you’ll never have peace to begin with.”

Yukinari was silent.

“Ahh,” Veronika said, her expression softening into a grin. “You’re wondering what right a mercenary has to go on about something like that. But I wasn’t born a mercenary, you know. What I’m saying are my personal conclusions, based on the life I’ve lived.”

“Veronika,” Yukinari said after a moment. “You were raised pretty well yourself, weren’t you?”

“What makes you say that?”

“The things you’re saying, it’s the way an educated person would think. There’s a clear logic. And the words you use, the expressions—there are some slightly more difficult ones here and there.”

Yukinari worked the second Derrringer he’d created while it was empty, making sure all the moving parts functioned.

“…Yes,” Veronika said. “It was a decent life. Years ago, though, my home was destroyed and my father was killed. My father was strong, but also kind. So people looked down on him.”

Yukinari said nothing.

“But…” For a second, Veronika looked almost melancholy about something. “You look sheltered to me, coddled by peace, but just the fact that people who think like you exist makes me happy. My mother… She left this life even before my father did, but she was that way, too.”

Yukinari couldn’t quite find the right words. “It… It sounds like you’ve been through a lot.”

“Well, thankfully, it’s given me the strength to survive,” Veronika said, and then she smiled.

●

Berta and Veronika decided to simply stay at the sanctuary that night. By the time Yukinari had finished what he was doing with Derrringer, it was full dark outside, and returning to Friedland would have been dangerous. There were many obstacles along the mountain road, and the cloudy sky meant no light from the moon or stars. And a handheld lantern alone didn’t inspire much confidence.

Berta went back to her own room for the first time in several days and prepared an additional sleeping place. The sanctuary wasn’t built to receive guests; there was a spare room, but Ulrike was in there now. Veronika wasn’t especially set on having her own room, so she would sleep in Berta’s.

It was obviously too late to create a bed, so Berta set up an improvised sleeping place with sheets and a pillow. Still, she hesitated to simply lay them out on the floor, so she put a wooden board underneath the bedding.

“Sorry about this,” Veronika said, coming into the room just as Berta finished setting up. She glanced around, then set her belongings next to the just-completed bed without a moment’s hesitation. Then she took off the armor she was wearing. And then, to Berta’s consternation, she got in the bed.

“U-Um…”

This “bed” was just a wooden board with sheets and a pillow, spare items she’d found around the sanctuary. It couldn’t possibly be comfortable. Berta had intended to use it herself, but now…

“Yes, what?” Veronika cast a dour look at her.

“Oh, uh, I just thought you could… use my bed…”

“No, that’s all right,” Veronika said with a small smile. “I’m used to sleeping outdoors. As long as I can stretch out, that’s enough. I’ve even got a pillow here. A freeloader can’t ask for more than that.”

“I see…”

Berta could hardly press the point. Instead, she dutifully got into her own bed, and then, after an okay from Veronika, doused the lamp by her pillow.

Immediately, the room was filled with darkness. It was so dark, she couldn’t see her hand in front of her face. The inability to see naturally sharpened her hearing. She could detect the sound of her own breath and her heartbeat, as well as the breathing of Veronika, just nearby, and the rustling of cloth each time she shifted under her sheets.

Berta lay in silence. For once, she couldn’t sleep. Every night she would lie down in the darkness, close her eyes, and simply drift off. Back at the orphanage, it had been perfectly normal to share a room with someone else. Yet now…

“Can’t sleep?” Veronika’s voice suddenly drifted through the darkness. Berta had thought Veronika had fallen asleep immediately, but apparently she was still awake.

“Oh… No.”

“...Can I ask you one thing?”

This was rather sudden, but Berta replied, “Y-Yes, I’ll answer if I can…”

“Do you like that boy Yukinari?”

Her answer was immediate: “Yes.”

Veronika, though, didn’t seem to like this answer. “No, I didn’t mean it that way.”

“I’m sorry…?”

“I’m not talking about, do you respect him as a comrade or feel some kind of solidarity with him. I simply mean do you, as a woman, have feelings for him, as a man?”

Berta couldn’t think of what to say. She didn’t really understand what Veronika meant. “I’m the shrine maiden who’s been offered to Lord Yukinari, and—”

“Yes, I remember you saying that. But you also said that despite that, he’s never touched you. He doesn’t strike me as being totally uninterested in women. So that means either he’s not interested in you personally, or he feels some kind of duty to that girl Dasa.”

“Well, uh…”

“Or is it you yourself who’s holding back because of Dasa?”

Berta was silent. She hadn’t given it much thought, but maybe it was true.

“Your feelings for Yukinari—are they because you’re his shrine maiden? Or because he saved your life? Either way—if that’s all—then there’s no problem. If Yukinari doesn’t seek anything from you, then you don’t need to try to get him to make love to you out of some feeling of duty or indebtedness.”

“You… You think not…?”

“But if you love him as a woman, then you’ll want something more.”

Berta said nothing.

“Are you happy with things the way they are? Or not? If you forever hold yourself back because of Dasa, you’ll never gain Yukinari’s affections—is that all right? I know it doesn’t sound nice, but if you want something, sometimes you have to fight for it, take it. I’m not saying you should get rid of Dasa, of course. It’s a question of your own feelings.”

“I’m sorry… I don’t… really understand…”

That was her immediate response. But Berta realized that somewhere inside, she was nodding along to Veronika’s words. If Berta wanted Yukinari’s love—not out of debt or duty, but genuinely—then she couldn’t simply wait.

It was hard for her to say what her real, unfettered feelings truly were. For as long as she could remember, she had been taught that she would one day be offered up to an erdgod. She had been taught that she wasn’t like the other village girls, who dreamed of falling in love, marrying, bearing and raising children. Such a future, she was told, was not in store for her. So she had always tried not to think about it.

Now, suddenly, she was being told that it was all right for her to love someone as the object of her own desires, and she didn’t know what to make of it. She had never been allowed to want something for herself, and it left her with the sense that perhaps her desires were wrong. But…

Lord Yukinari…

Yukinari was kind. He was truly kind. If he hadn’t saved her— If he hadn’t taken on the role of the god—

If he hadn’t done those things, would Berta still want to offer herself to him? If she hadn’t been put here by circumstances, would she still want to be by his side?

She thought about it, and… yes. She believed she would.

So this was love she felt for him. Perhaps it had begun as duty, or because she owed her life to him, but from the moment she had this realization, it became real love.

It was okay for her to actively pursue him.

But… How? What could she do? She wasn’t smart like Fiona. She lacked Dasa’s intelligence, to say nothing of the sheer time the girl had spent with Yukinari. She didn’t have absolute power like Ulrike did. Even if she didn’t

intend to shove these other girls aside, at this rate Berta would get lost in the crowd.

“It’s a mistake to think things will go your way without your doing anything. Sometimes, by the time you realize that, it’s already too late.”

Veronika seemed to have read her mind. Her tone was somber—but also empty; it sounded somehow as if she were looking far into the distance. Her words seemed to spring from her own experience. Clearly, there was something she regretted. A time when she had done nothing, or had been unable to do anything.

Something Veronika had said flitted through Berta’s mind.

I’m tired of leaving people behind.

“Sorry,” Veronika said, a hint of a smile in her voice. “Maybe it’s none of my business. You’ve done a lot for me, and I’m grateful. It’s not much, but I thought maybe it would help you. If you don’t like it... Just think of it as the babbling of a passing stranger.”

“No, I—”

“Good night again, for real this time.”

“Right. Good night...”

Berta closed her eyes once more. The night and her eyelids formed two layers of darkness enveloping her. She lay there, turning Veronika’s words over in her mind again and again.

●

Morning. Waking up was the worst these days.

He would wake to find himself in a room vastly inferior to the one he’d had in the house he had grown up in. It wasn’t even as good as the lodgings he’d had in the barracks after he entered the Missionary Order. Wind got in through the cracks, the night was dark, the bed creaked, the pillow was thin. This was less a home than a warehouse. The building had, in fact, originally been intended for storage. It was at least better than camping out, in that it kept *most* of the elements off him.

Pitiful. It was an utterly pitiful place to live.

Finally, though, he put on a familiar shirt—he had packed plenty of extras into the carriage when the Civilizing Expedition set off—and he began to feel human again.

He thought about the day’s work. When shipments of goods went to Rostruch, he acted as a guard. On other days, he generally patrolled around Friedland and looked after public safety. That was basic. He wasn’t sure about guarding merchant caravans, but looking after local stability was part of the job he had originally been sent here to do, so he didn’t have any specific objection. Still, it bothered him that when the townspeople looked at him, there was no awe or respect in their eyes. Depending on the day, he might even be put to sundry chores.

Truth be told, that was what he resented the most. Knights of the Missionary Order trained hard, but fighting and farming use the body in fundamentally different ways, so he was always more tired than he expected to be. The unfamiliar work made his joints ache. And if he took even a moment too long to do something, the townspeople didn't hesitate to yell at him. He had been born to the nobility; he had never been shouted at by commoners.

"I'm supposed to be a knight!"

The frustrated words slipped out of him, but nobody responded. Griping was common enough in the unit, but nobility was rare even in the Order, so there were many who quietly accepted what had happened to them. There were so few with whom he could commiserate.

Still, the human body was an astonishing thing; even he could see that, despite circumstances he would never have wished upon himself, he was adapting day by day. Sometimes the girls from the orphanage would give him words of encouragement as they passed by. It wasn't much, yet now it was one of his greatest joys. If his younger self, from even a year ago, could see how far he had fallen, what would he think?

With those thoughts in his head he left the hut and headed down the street, whereupon someone called out to him.

"Well, aren't you a hard worker, Arlen." He—Arlen Lansdowne—turned to see Fiona Schillings, accompanied by what appeared to be a maid. "Starting your patrol so early?"

"...Hrmph."

Arlen had met Fiona at the academy in the capital, and she had always been the same: very intelligent, the trade-off being that she was strangely stubborn and impertinent. Since they had met again in Friedland, he thought she had only gotten more pompous. Truly a hopeless woman.

"Maybe you're getting used to helping this town?" she asked. "I see the girls from the orphanage stopping by your place. Don't teach them anything weird, okay?" Maybe Fiona thought this passed for light banter, but Arlen was only further incensed by the note of mockery.

"Y-You are a vulgar woman! A truly vulgar woman!"

Fiona was unfazed by Arlen's outburst. "What are you so upset about? And what did I say that was vulgar? Here I thought I was encouraging you."

"To think I would so much as touch such young children!"

"Touch them? ...Heh, is that what this is about? I was talking about trying to indoctrinate them into Church teachings or your twisted way of looking at the world. So which of us has our mind in the gutter?"

"Hrk...?" Arlen, who had indeed misunderstood Fiona, had no response.

Still, Fiona had a composure beyond her years, and he couldn't stand it. He simply couldn't help feeling that she was making fun of the depths to which he'd fallen.

"Y-You want to encourage me? Well, actions speak louder than words! Do something about that hovel, for a start!"

“What, you want us to build you a mansion?” Fiona was smirking. “What are you up to? Is your brain still asleep? You can’t talk in your sleep when you’re wide awake, you know.”

Arlen went silent. Fiona had always been like this. She was such a quick thinker, she could make a case for anything and make it stick. He had gotten into more than a few arguments with her in his time, but he’d never won.

“Okay,” she said. “Get moving. You went to all the trouble of getting up early—don’t waste it!”

“Hrmph.”

Having anything more to do with her would only make him even angrier. It would be better just to get to work, even if he didn’t want to. He set off walking, but Fiona’s voice came from behind him.

“It’s true that I’m grateful to you, though. I’ll make you something sweet for when you’re done working today—savor the anticipation!”

Arlen felt his cheeks twitch upward of their own accord and pointedly forced them back down. He didn’t think Fiona could see him, but just in case. He could hardly call himself a knight of the Missionary Order—or even a grown man—if he could be bought off with a few treats. Fiona must have thought she was very clever, Arlen told himself, using the carrot and stick this way. But Arlen Lansdowne would not be so easily brought to heel.

Yes. He was Arlen Lansdowne, knight of the Missionary Order. Perhaps he was doing menial work in Friedland, but it certainly didn’t mean he had turned his back on the teachings of the True Church of Harris. He was no apostate.

Truth be told, what Arlen and the other knights were doing in Friedland now was not, in principle, so different from their original plan. As the local garrison, they would have protected the town. Because Yukinari had already defeated the erdgod, the creature supported by the area’s barbaric customs, the missionaries’ job could be considered half-done already. Probably. He thought.

If there was anything in particular that was a problem, it was that Yukinari had destroyed the statue of the guardian saint…

“But that’s over,” he whispered to himself. “There was nothing we could do about that.”

They had never for a moment thought that they might find the Blue Angel when their expedition came here. Nor had they expected that the angel’s fighting abilities might be greater even than the statue of the guardian saint. Angels were originally created to perform miracles when converting people; they were never intended for use in battle. Arlen had never even considered the notion of pitting an angel against a guardian statue.

In any event, they hadn’t planned for any of this. There was nothing they could have done. Their enemy had turned out to be overwhelmingly powerful.

To confront a vastly more powerful enemy, one against which there was no hope of victory, was a fool's errand. Arlen was doing the smart thing. He was protecting himself, maintaining a modicum of freedom, and accomplishing some part of his charge as a knight—even as he pretended to obey his captors.

Under the circumstances, this was the best choice. So he kept telling himself.

And then...

"—ed. —y, are you listening?!"

The voice snapped him back to reality. He looked around in a hurry and realized he was already outside of town.

During the day, several of the town gates were left open, making it comparatively easy to go in and out. Arlen had been walking along, lost in thought, and had left the walls without even linking up with his fellow missionaries. The guards at the gate knew Yukinari had asked Arlen and the others to do patrols, so they wouldn't have stopped him even if they'd noticed him.

Even so...

"Arlen Lansdowne?"

The voice said his name again.

A female knight stood in front of him. She was wearing a light outfit—no plate armor, but her clothes bore the insignia of the Missionary Order in several places. She was perhaps about twenty years old, and despite her youth, three men were following her.

Oh yeah... I never did hear how old she was, he thought.

Many young members of powerful noble families entered the Missionary Order, so it wasn't unusual to see a young woman in a position of authority. Arlen himself was in a relatively high position for his age, thanks to his aristocratic background.

"Oh—Oh! It's been a long time, Angela Jindel."

He was a knight of the Missionary Order. That was what he reminded himself of as he hurriedly straightened up and greeted the woman.

Angela Jindel. They knew each other's names and faces because they had entered the Order at the same time. Angela was so passionate about the teachings of the True Church of Harris that he suspected she hadn't joined just to make herself look good, and she had very much held her own against other members of the Order despite her gender.

Now that he thought about it, he'd heard rumors that she had been assigned to the Ninth Missionary Brigade.

"Is that the town of Friedland over there?" she asked, looking at the walls that rose behind Arlen. "Where the Sixth Missionary Brigade is posted?"

"Oh, um, yes. Of course." He nodded, trying to hide the shudder that ran through him.

"How's the conversion coming?"

“Nicely. We’ve made no errors.”

It sounded almost like he was making an excuse for something. A doubtful look passed over Angela’s face, but she didn’t pursue it. It didn’t seem that she had been sent by Church headquarters in the capital just to see how things were going with the Sixth Brigade. But what, then?

“I see. Would you show me to Friedland, then?”

“Right, leave it to—me?!”

“Is there any trouble here?”

“U-Uh, no—not at all!” He frowned seriously, trying to cover the crack in his voice. “Why would you ask that…?”

“You’d be surprised how many towns appear to be converted, but still harbor rebel elements,” Angela said. She sounded somehow self-deprecating. “We’re looking for someone. As I said, many of these ignorant frontier folk refuse to cooperate with us, so I just wanted to know upfront how things were going. Forgive me.”

“I-Is that so? Pay it no mind.” Arlen somehow managed to regain the bearing of a knight of the Missionary Order, even as a cold sweat trickled down his back.

●

The mansion had gotten rather lively. Fiona, attending to the day’s work in her office, frowned and looked up.

“Huh…?”

Using formulae she’d created in consultation with Yukinari and Ulrike, she was trying to determine what kind of crop yields they could expect from the new fields and irrigation measures. But it was hard to focus on her calculations when the house was so noisy.

With a sigh, she set down her pen and stood up—and as if this were some sort of cue, the door to the office was opened without so much as a knock.

“Wh-What’s going on? Who are you?!” Fiona asked, surprised.

She found herself confronting a woman wearing the uniform of the Missionary Order. She was only wearing light armor, the design somewhat different from that Arlen and the other men wore, but Fiona had seen female knights in the capital. Not that she remembered there being a woman in Arlen’s unit…

“Are you the leader of this town?”

The words were polite, but the tone was arrogance itself. Anyway, it reminded her of how Arlen had sounded when he first came to Friedland. The contempt for Fiona and her fellow barbarians was unmistakable.

“Quite young, aren’t you?” The knight didn’t look so old herself.

“I don’t know who you are,” Fiona said, “but you’d do well to remember your manners.” She had been shocked at first, but now she scowled at the other woman’s imperious attitude. Fiona didn’t care if she was a missionary knight or the Dominus Doctrinae; she had no obligation to smile at someone

who barged into a woman's room without even knocking and started asking rude questions.

"I believe a mercenary fled to this town. Hand him over." The woman didn't even give her name, but simply stated her demand.

"Mercenary? I'm afraid I don't know what you mean."

No doubt she was referring to Veronika. Fiona couldn't have handed her over even if she'd wanted to—Veronika had already left. But what were the chances the knight would believe her if she told the truth? And on top of that, this woman was probably part of the Aldreil garrison Veronika had been talking about.

Meaning...

"You have no idea at all? No guesses?"

"No. And if I did, I wouldn't feel compelled to share them with someone who doesn't even know how to knock when she enters a room."

"Goodness. Pardon me," the woman said, shrugging. "I never thought a barbarian in this part of the world would have heard of the custom of knocking. Maybe the civilizing effort has gone better than I expected."

She seemed to be speaking over her shoulder to someone. A moment later Arlen appeared, out of breath.

"Jindel...!" he said to the woman. At the same time, he caught sight of Fiona's piercing gaze and froze.

What in the world is going on here?! her glare seemed to say.

Arlen's mouth worked open and closed, and he shook his head vigorously.

No, you've got it all wrong! You've got it utterly wrong! she thought he was saying. Probably. He followed this up with a series of incomprehensible gestures, trying desperately to tell her something, but without having worked out a code in advance, she couldn't for the life of her tell what he was saying.

"I see," the woman said, almost to herself. "Well, perhaps the mercenary died somewhere before he got here. The corpse then eaten by scavengers, no doubt."

It appeared Arlen's false report to Church headquarters in the capital hadn't been discovered; this woman wasn't from another unit dispatched specifically to deal with the matter. But...

"That aside, why are you not wearing the Holy Mark?" She seemed to sense the momentary relief and spring on it.

"The Holy Mark?"

Behind the woman, Arlen was once again doing his strange little dance, although he probably thought he was making meaningful gestures. Fiona stared at him, trying to come up with a good excuse as fast as she could.

"In this town, we've had many passionate believers in the Church's teachings since before the honored members of the Missionary Order arrived."

"Oh, my. Is that so?"

“Yes, ma’am. Arlen Lansdowne and I were classmates at the academy in the capital. I actually sought to enter the Order myself after graduation, but then I received word that my father’s health was deteriorating rapidly, and I rushed back here.”

“Th-That’s true,” Arlen sputtered. “Completely, utterly true.”

Quiet, you, Fiona glared at him, then resumed lying through her teeth. “When I spoke to the villagers about the True Church of Harris, they were quite taken with it. I’m not clergy, so I couldn’t perform baptisms, but the Church’s teachings spread like wildfire. Just when we were considering whether we should request clergy to be sent to us, the noble Mr. Lansdowne appeared.”

“I see. Quite a story.”

“Yes, ma’am. The only problem is, the erdgod in this area was a wily creature. It shamefully attacked Mr. Lansdowne and his comrades from behind, destroying most of their equipment... including the device used for the ritual of the Holy Mark.”

Fiona was amazed by the lies that came fluently out of her own mouth, but she kept a gentle smile on her face. The trick when telling a huge lie like this was to pepper it with small truths. It was, of course, true that the Holy Mark device had been destroyed. Although it was Yukinari who had done it.

“The missionaries later defeated the erdgod, but as so many of the townspeople were already believers, it was decided there was no need to rush the ceremony of the Holy Mark. Repairing the device and ordering new parts was put off while Mr. Lansdowne helped repair the damage the erdgod had done to our town.”

“I see. That makes sense,” the woman said with a pronounced nod. “Well, our only business here was to deal with the escaped mercenary. If he’s not here, we’ll withdraw.” The woman—rudely never having given her name—calmly turned on her heel and made to leave. “Mr. Lansdowne, would you kindly see me out of town?”

“Y- Er, um, yes, of course,” Arlen said with a strained smile. He looked back to see what Fiona was thinking, but she shot him a glance that silently said, *Hurry up and get your nosy little friend out of here!* He nodded eagerly and ushered the female knight from the room.

For a long moment, Fiona listened to their footsteps recede down the hall, trying not to breathe. Only when she could no longer hear them did she let out a long exhalation.

“Ahhhhh... What in the world just happened...?”

The anger at the woman’s tremendous rudeness, as well as Arlen’s brainless way of handling the situation, didn’t bubble up until a few moments later.

●

Both of them were silent after they left the Schillings mansion. They gathered up the three knights who had been waiting outside, Angela

exchanging nods with them, after which they headed directly for the town gate. She had a soft smile on her face, but Arlen knew this was a permanent expression with her, even when she was boiling mad, and he honestly wasn't sure he was going to survive the trip out of town. If she found out now that his unit hadn't done their job, all the humiliation he had endured would be for nothing.

Once they were past the gate, Angela stopped and turned back to him. "Mr. Lansdowne. I thank you for seeing me off." Had they really managed to trick her? Arlen was just letting out an internal sigh of relief when Angela said, "If you don't mind, there's a few things I'd like to ask you before I go."

"Such as?" he replied, straining to appear calm.

"Where are the other missionaries?"

"They're… patrolling the area right now."

"I'm sure they are. Yet I didn't see a single other knight the whole time I was in town. Surely you don't send every man out on patrol at once?"

Arlen didn't speak. That was exactly what they did.

Of the personnel in Arlen's Sixth Missionary Brigade, half had been badly wounded in the initial battle with Yukinari and were still recovering. Of the remaining half, some had flatly refused Yukinari's proposal and were currently in confinement. The handful who were left over, including Arlen, had all been slated to go out on patrol today. Presumably they had gone ahead and started their sweep, albeit wondering why Arlen wasn't at the meeting point. He had been careful to plot their route to the Schillings mansion so as not to run into the patrol, so it was only natural that Angela hadn't seen any other missionaries.

"And where is your guardian saint statue? And the wagon used to transport it? The only path around here large enough to accommodate it is the town's main road. Yet I don't see so much as ruts from the wheels."

Now Arlen was really stuck. The statue of the guardian saint was traditionally placed in the most eye-catching spot whenever a garrison was posted to a new town. From there it could gaze out over the entire village. Not to see it would certainly strike a fellow missionary as strange.

"Don't tell me it's been damaged…?"

"Y… Yes, I'm afraid it has. In the fight with the erdgod, part of it…"

Come to think of it, Fiona had made up some nonsense about Arlen and the others losing much of their equipment when they were ambushed by the erdgod. If he drew on that, he might be able to get through this.

She would never believe that the statue had been completely destroyed, but it was conceivable that a part of it might have been damaged. Even a sword, with enough use, might crack and need to be repaired. Weapons were always subject to wear and tear.

"In that case, wouldn't you request replacement parts from the Order's headquarters?"

"Well… there are utterly… c-complex circumstances… involved…"

“Circumstances. Circumstances, you say?” Angela looked at him, still smiling.

“Well, you see…” But Arlen’s wits weren’t quick enough to provide him with any further excuses. Sweating profusely, he fell silent.

“…Really? Very well, then.” There was no telling what Angela thought of this, but she didn’t pursue the matter any further. Instead, with a smile, she said, “Let me give you this. Consider it a sign of my confidence that you retain your unwavering faith in our God.”

She handed him a small leather pouch.

Chapter Three: The Weak Ones' Fight

Yukinari hesitated.

"Good. Next."

He was speaking to two people lying on their bellies. All three of them could feel a gentle breeze brushing their cheeks.

They were back on the observation platform, where they'd been the day before. Yukinari, Berta, Dasa, and Veronika were there. And just as before, Ulrike had set up targets.

Having confirmed that Derrringer worked and was basically accurate, Yukinari had decided to focus on improving the snipers rather than the guns. For that matter, Derrringer was so simple there wouldn't have been much to improve even if he'd wanted to.

"...Mn."

"Here goes..."

Successive gunshots. Currently, Dasa and Berta were on the rifles. They had already gone through more than a hundred bullets each, adjusting their scopes and trying to get a feel for long-distance shooting. Veronika had joined them initially, but it simply didn't seem to suit her at all, and she soon gave up.

The targets were so far away that to the naked eye they looked like dots in the distance. You would take aim, steady your breath, and then gently—carefully, so as not to shake the gun—pull the trigger. It was a greater feat of nerves than it appeared.

"Hm..." Yukinari squinted, holding up the simple binoculars he'd made to use during sniping practice.

Dasa had missed. Berta had hit. In fact, her shots landed more often than Dasa's.

Dasa was much more used to handling the gun as such. She was much more confident, for example, in the loading, firing, and ejecting that made up a single shot. Sometimes, when taking out the ammo, Berta's hand would slip and she would drop it. When using a gun, ideally you keep your eyes forward, readying the next bullet by feel alone, a difficult task if you're not used to it.

But for Dasa, who was used to Red Chili, Derrringer seemed confusing in many ways. That annoyed her, and her annoyance inevitably had an impact on her hit ratio.

Berta, on the other hand, had never handled a gun, and if that meant she wasn't used to it, it also meant she had no bad habits to uproot, and as a result could accept Derrringer for what it was.

Actually..., Yukinari thought.

It was Berta herself who had come asking to be allowed to participate in sniping practice today. He didn't know the specifics, but Veronika seemed to have said something to her. Whatever the reason, it was an unusually

proactive request from her. In fact, ever since she had expressed her desire to be a sniper, she had seemed exceptionally focused.

It's like this is all she has, he thought.

Dasa had Red Chili and her knowledge of alchemy. Veronika, of course, had such great martial ability that she could stand against Arlen and his knights. The two of them had other ways and means of fighting. But Berta completely lacked any such ability. It only made sense; that was how she'd been raised. It shouldn't have been a source of embarrassment for someone who was neither a warrior nor a mercenary.

But Berta herself seemed to feel differently.

She appeared to have an innate talent for the sniper rifle, but her absolute focus also allowed her to acclimate to Derrringer very quickly.

At the moment of the shot, she would hold her breath. She would use only her finger to pull the trigger, bringing it straight backward. She was almost inordinately careful to employ these basics, which Yukinari had taught her, every time she fired.

The rate at which she improved was, frankly, startling. But she had one fatal weak point as a sniper.

"Ooh!" Through the binoculars, Yukinari spotted something moving at the edge of his vision. "Berta, do see that? Just to the right of the target. There's a rabbit."

She turned the gun to the right slightly—such a subtle movement that an onlooker might not have seen it. "Wha? Oh, yes. There is." She was probably confirming the creature's presence for herself in the scope's circular field of view.

"How about rabbit for dinner? Take the shot, Berta."

"What?!" she yelped.

She offered no further objection, though; after blinking at Yukinari two or three times, she put her finger back on Derrringer's trigger. Yukinari could see that her entire body was stiff with tension, and he could see the tiny trembles of Derrringer's barrel.

Berta held her breath. But she didn't shoot.

Or perhaps more accurately, she couldn't shoot. She couldn't bring herself to pull the trigger before the rabbit disappeared into a nearby clump of grass.

"Um, I— I'm sorry…" She let go of the gun and bowed her head so deeply it looked like she was about to offer an apologetic kowtow. "You gave me an order, Lord Yukinari, but I couldn't… I'm so sorry…"

"How many times do I have to tell you, don't worry about it. It's not your fault, and I'm not angry!"

"Yuki…" Dasa was glaring at him over her glasses.

"B-But Lord Yukinari…"

"It's all right. No kowtows! That's an order."

"Er, y-yes, sir…" She nodded and sat up.

This was her biggest problem. An obvious flaw in a sniper, or anyone who was planning to fight. Berta was simply too kindhearted.

If sniping had been nothing more than a contest to see who could shoot a wooden target, she might have been nearly unbeatable. But Yukinari needed snipers who could be part of a battle. Snipers who could pull the trigger when their target was a living person.

Could Berta do that? Could he make Berta do that? It was a failing as a warrior, but not as a human being. It could, in fact, be considered a virtue, true proof of her humanity. But to become a full-fledged sniper, she would have to get rid of it.

That was why Yukinari hesitated. No matter how much talent she had, he didn't know if it was right to make Berta use Derrringer.

●

In the reception room of the Schillings mention. Yukinari, Dasa, Berta, and Veronika had returned from sniper practice. They, Fiona, and Arlen were discussing what to do next after the sudden visit of Angela Jindel.

"A woman claiming to be a vice captain with a Civilizing Expedition from the True Church of Harris was here," Fiona told them. "Veronika, I think she was looking for you."

Veronika's brow furrowed slightly.

"We were able to throw her off for the time being," Fiona said, "but I'm not sure she completely believed us."

According to Arlen, Angela Jindel was the Vice Captain of the Ninth Missionary Brigade, stationed in Aldreil. In addition, there were two other missionary brigades posted in the city.

"I think it's about time you told me exactly what the connection is between you guys and this missionary," Veronika said, glaring at Arlen. On reflection, Yukinari realized no one had ever filled Veronika in on the circumstances surrounding the missionaries in Friedland. He raised his hand.

"Let me field this one. It's kind of a long story, but basically... I destroyed this missionary unit's ultimate weapon. They didn't want to have to admit what had happened to Church headquarters, and we didn't want word getting out that we'd defeated a unit of missionaries. It would only earn us a reprisal from the Church. So, publicly, this town was successfully converted by the missionaries."

"Ultimate weapon…? You mean one of those statues?" Astonishment crept into Veronika's expression.

"Er, yeah..."

"And you defeated one? Alone? Those things can bury an erdgod!"

"Yuki also defeated... this area's... erdgod," Dasa said quietly.

"I've, uh, got a few tricks up my sleeve," Yukinari said with a shrug. "I surprised them."

He had never actually used his powers of physical reconstitution in front of Veronika. Nor had she seen him transform into the black-armored body

that allowed him to make fullest use of his abilities as an angel. There was no real reason to hide it from her now, but if he started trying to explain, the conversation would go on forever. Right now, they needed to decide how to deal with the threat from Aldreil.

Veronika leaned forward and said, “I’m willing to forgo the specifics for the time being, but Yukinari, are you saying you can single-handedly take on the Missionary Order?”

He was afraid he had a pretty good idea of what she had in mind. “Practically speaking, sort of. But even when I beat Arlen and his unit, it wasn’t easy. I had Dasa backing me up. I might be able to do it again if I were fighting a single unit. But two or more? It’d probably be hopeless.” He shook his head. “I’m sorry, but I don’t think I can do what you’re hoping.”

No doubt she wanted him to help her comrades who were being held in Aldreil. If she went back there to face the missionary units alone, she would be lucky to escape with her life, let alone defeat them. Hence she was hoping for help from Yukinari.

“But if you used this ‘Derrringer’ of yours to soften them up first…”

“You know how much noise it makes.” He shrugged again. “If they had a group no larger than maybe ten people, you might be able to cut down their numbers by sniping at them while they were startled, but that’s the best you could hope for. If they shut themselves up in a building, it would be hard to shoot them. I might be able to build a device to dampen the sound somewhat, but that means the gun would be harder to aim, or maybe less powerful, or less accurate…”

But above all, he doubted that Berta, their best sniper, would be willing and able to shoot a human being. There was an outside chance she would go along with it if they were only aiming at hands or feet, but of course, human extremities made tremendously small targets and were often in motion, making the shot that much more difficult.

“You’re trying to get out of here and back to Aldreil, right?” Fiona asked. She seemed to have an idea.

“Yes…”

“Then let me make a suggestion: let Friedland hire you.”

“…What?” Veronika asked dubiously.

Fiona looked her square in the eye as she explained. “Stay here in this town. I’m not asking you to give up on rescuing your friends or forget about revenge. If anything, this could be the perfect opportunity for you.”

Veronika shook her head. “I don’t understand what you mean.”

“Frankly, I really doubt this Angela Jindel believes everything we told her about what’s going on in this town. I suspect that as soon as she gets back, the missionaries in Aldreil are going to find out that Friedland wasn’t really converted.”

And that meant, most likely, that the knights in Aldreil would show up to convert the town at the point of a sword. It would be a matter of saving face for them. Chances were good that the effort would involve two or even three

units of missionaries. In other words, two or three times as much power would be brought to bear on Friedland as when Yukinari had defeated Arlen's unit. And there was no question that it would be coming soon.

"Assuming they don't want to parley, and I doubt they will, we're going to have to fight them."

"I see where you're going." Fiona didn't have to spell out her entire idea before Veronika grasped the point. Whether for rescue or revenge, Veronika would have a better chance against the missionaries after they had engaged Friedland—after their numbers had been whittled down.

"The perfect opportunity for me, huh?" Veronika said, irony in her smile. She seemed to have divined the real motivation for Fiona's suggestion. Aside from Yukinari, powerful as he was, Friedland had very few people who could fight. Yukinari had passed out some Durandalls and taught people how to use them, but people who had been carrying nothing more complicated than spades and hoes yesterday were not going to turn into trained soldiers today just because someone gave them guns.

The problem was less one of ability than of mental preparation. Excepting perhaps crimes of passion and other moments of intense agitation, it takes no small amount of personal resolve for one human to kill another. Those who devoted themselves to the martial arts called killing someone "the first step," and a distinction was widely observed between the time before someone had taken this step and after. But that only showed how difficult that first kill was.

The opposite side of this coin, however, was that the first kill was the hardest hurdle to cross. If there were someone who could take a group of new soldiers, put them into a frenzy, and get them past that choke point—then Friedland's supply of soldiers might increase relatively quickly.

And Veronika seemed like she might be ideal for that role. Having her on their side would mean more than just one more powerful warrior in their ranks. It might mean being able to produce many more warriors.

"All right," Veronika said, her expression softening for a moment. "Although I might point out that if I were to sneak into Aldreil while the missionaries were occupied with you guys, it would be easy enough to help my friends."

She was right. That might be the *real* perfect opportunity for her. It meant that what Fiona was really asking her to do was to put off saving her friends in order to help Friedland.

"Treacherous woman! You utterly treacherous woman!" Arlen rose from his chair angrily, but Veronika was unperturbed.

"Calm down. I'll take her suggestion. I'm a mercenary—I sell my life for gold. You guys saved my life, so that means you're entitled to some payment. I have no objection to being hired by your town. It's true enough that if we can get Friedland battle-ready, it'll mean fewer missionaries for me to deal with later."

"Thanks," Yukinari said with a grin.

As far as hiring went, well, the merchant who had engaged Veronika and her companions had hired them first, and they were all still in Aldreil. It would have been understandable if Veronika had rejected Fiona's suggestion in favor of rescuing them. The fact that she hadn't implied that she felt something for Friedland.

"You have my gratitude, too," Fiona said. "And Arlen?"

"What?" he asked irritably, arms crossed. "You want us on board too? Ignore all logic and fight with you lot, against our fellow missionaries? Is that what you're asking?"

Arlen and the others had knowledge and experience of warfare. Perhaps not as much as Veronika, but compared to the townspeople, they were accomplished fighters. It was only natural that Fiona would hope they might join in the defense of her town.

"Sorry," Arlen said. "But you'll have to take my weapons and toss me in jail again."

Fiona could only sigh.

●

He was angry. He was utterly angry.

Relieved of his sword and armor, Arlen said not a word as he was led to the storehouse built beside the Schillings mansion. Inside was a jury-rigged "jail"—more of a cage—made of wood and heavy rope. Several other knights were already imprisoned there. They, like Arlen, had been cooperating, patrolling the town and helping to guard the trade caravans. Those who had refused to help all along, as well as the knights recovering from their injuries, were in other locations.

The prisoners were complaining amongst themselves:

"Why now…?"

"So it's come to this…"

It was understandable. They had come here as apostles of the True Church of Harris, believing they would gain honor by converting the ignorant frontier people, but instead they had been stripped of their equipment, taken prisoner, and treated in humiliating ways.

They had endured it all. And just recently, their treatment had improved slightly, and some of them had even begun to think perhaps they could accept the way things were. Until the Friedlanders decided it would be easier to throw them back in jail.

Only a sadist wouldn't be bothered by this. And to add insult to injury, the person who saw them to their prison was Veronika. A mercenary of unknown origin who had simply drifted into town, bringing trouble with her. If it had been Yukinari leading them away, they could've comforted themselves that there was nothing they could do, that he was just too powerful. But having Veronika there just made them angrier.

But…

"…That Deputy Mayor seems to be a good person," said Veronika. She was walking half a step behind Arlen, holding a rope tied around his waist.

Of course, he would have to turn around to see her expression. He was curious what had moved Veronika to say that about Fiona, but somehow he felt that looking back would be a defeat, and so he marched resolutely forward.

Whatever look was on her face, she continued: “She might doubt you, but if she thinks there’s any chance you’ll turn on her, she shouldn’t go to all the hassle of putting you in prison. She ought to just kill you. Or if she really can’t stand to take your life, at least break your arms and legs so you can’t fight anymore. That’s what I would do, anyway.”

Arlen had no answer for the calm, cold words. Deep within, he knew she was right.

“She’s not even trying to use you as hostages.”

That would have been another way to deal with Arlen and the others. It wasn’t a certainty that Angela and her superiors would be moved by hostages, though; it was equally likely that they would simply attack, on the premise that real knights of the Missionary Order would never shame themselves by being captured alive.

“In short, she can’t have you going rogue on her, but she doesn’t want to force you to fight your former comrades, either.”

Arlen remained silent.

“It would be simple enough to keep you in line. Just take a few of the other knights hostage. Didn’t I hear more than half your unit is still recovering? Then they’re practically hostages already. She’d just need to remind you that if you betrayed her, she’d kill them. And yet instead she’s gone to all the trouble of setting up this ‘jail.’”

She didn’t exactly complete the thought, leaving her exact meaning ambiguous. Was she saying that this was an act of kindness on Fiona’s part? Arlen more or less understood what she was driving at.

“Get in.” Veronika pushed Arlen into the prison. He entered and sat beside the other knights. Then Veronika closed the palisade gate and locked it, the lock and key being the only metal parts of the whole affair.

The jail may have been a haphazard construction of wood and rope and a storehouse, but it was still impossible for the unarmed people inside to break out. The interior was relatively spacious, not built to be constricting, but the cage-like architecture made them feel they were being treated like animals, intensifying their frustration.

Veronika left. Arlen tested the gate to see if it was locked. Then he pulled off his boot and took something out.

It was flat, a folding knife. And not just a knife. Besides a blade, it included a pair of pliers and a little hammer as well. They were relatively flimsy, but they had been designed to be hidden like this; it was only to be expected that they wouldn’t be as tough as normal tools. They wouldn’t serve as weapons, of course, but they were more than enough to cut some rope or pull out some stakes.

This was what had been in the bag Angela had given him. Just as Fiona suspected, Angela had seen through everything. She knew the conversion had failed, she knew he'd been lying about the all-powerful statue, she even knew that he and the others no longer had their weapons and were being put to sundry chores. So, when she left the village, Angela had given Arlen an order.

"If you ever want to wash off the stain of your incompetence, you'll do as I tell you."

Soon, very soon, Angela and her forces would attack this town. She knew Arlen and the others would almost certainly be locked up somewhere before that happened. As Veronika had said, it was possible the knights would be killed or crippled—and in that case, there would be nothing that could be done. But if not, they were to break out of prison, retrieve their weapons if possible, and help Angela execute a pincer attack. Even if they weren't able to get their weapons back, they could at least sow confusion on the Friedland side. This blade might barely be bigger than the palm of his hand, but it was large enough to press to Fiona's throat, to gain a little leverage over Yukinari.

If he could do that, Angela would almost certainly win.

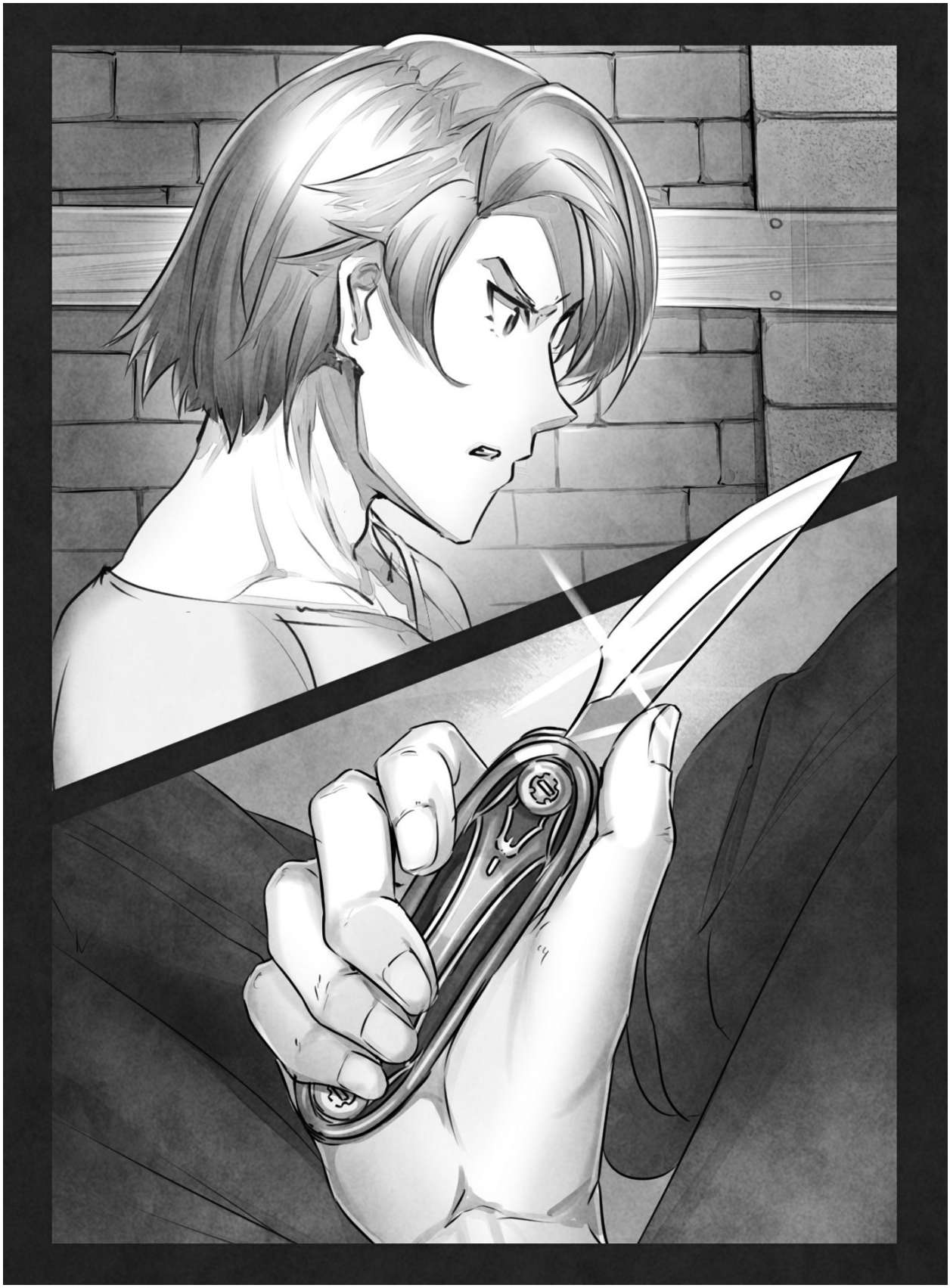
It meant Fiona had been right to be suspicious.

Arlen didn't say a word, but only let out a breath as he stared at the knife in his hand.

●

When Veronika returned from putting Arlen and the others in the jail, she, Yukinari, and his companions met in the Schillings mansion to discuss what to do.

"As I said before, as far as I know, there are three missionary brigades stationed in Aldreil. Considering how important a base like that would be to them, it seems unlikely that all three would leave at once. So I think we can expect two of the brigades to come against us." Veronika looked at a map of Friedland and the environs, open on the desk, as she spoke. "Most likely, they'll split up and encircle Friedland, or perhaps go for a pincer movement by cutting off the main roads. I understand you're tremendously powerful, Yukinari, but even you can't protect the town from an attack from two directions at once."



“Probably not.” Even Yukinari had no choice but to admit it. However great his personal strength might be, alone he would be defeated by sheer numbers. In particular, he would be defending, and it wouldn’t be enough just to put the city behind him. They could come from all sides, and he wouldn’t be able to respond.

“Geez… What do they enjoy so much about doing this?” Yukinari muttered angrily, letting out a sigh. “If they want to believe in God, then they can go ahead. They’re welcome to pray—by themselves. But no, they have to force others to believe, too.”

Veronika frowned as she looked at Yukinari, as if surprised at the suddenness of this.

“I hate the Harris Church, it’s true. But I don’t particularly want to destroy other towns or expand my territory or whatever. Why can’t they just leave us alone?”

“Because they think they’re right, I suppose,” Veronika said, almost a murmur. “And they want everyone to acknowledge they’re right. Because there’s only one truth.”

“There’s as many truths as there are people,” Yukinari said.

“I agree, but that’s not what their doctrine teaches. Their God is truth incarnate, the manifestation of justice. Their God is the only one in the whole world, and all others are demons spreading evil teachings. So truth and justice are one, and they acknowledge no others.”

Yukinari looked at Veronika, his eyes narrowed, saying nothing.

“Everyone wants certainty. They want to believe they’re correct. So they refuse to admit the existence of things that run counter to their ideas or beliefs. They try to eliminate them, if possible.”

“…I guess so.”

“When two people confront each other, if they don’t want to resolve things peacefully and so long as a more powerful third party doesn’t intervene, they’ll settle the issue by force. And usually, the defeated side loses everything. So you keep building your own power, making yourself stronger, in case there’s an enemy out there you haven’t seen yet. I’m sure it seems logical to them. Whether or not we think so.”

“That’s a blunt way of putting it… Although I understand what you’re saying.”

“Moral good and evil have nothing to do with it. If you want to protect your principles and convictions, you have to get stronger. It isn’t a question of whether you want to or not. But then others see you as a threat and take it as a reason to arm themselves…”

From that perspective, the True Church of Harris might well perceive Yukinari as a threat to their very dogma. He might be living quietly in the country now, but there was no guarantee he wouldn’t one day come at the Church with his fangs bared.

“In other words, just having power makes you part of that dynamic, whether you like it or not…”

At this point, it didn’t matter whether Yukinari had initially been pursued by the Church or not. The Church would never see someone with his power and his wish for autonomy as anything but a threat.

“Yukinari, whatever your personal ideals might be, if you don’t want to be buried by other people’s choices and beliefs, you need strength. At least as much as the enemy you’re facing, or else you’ll be swallowed up.”

So he needed to mobilize all the combat strength he could find in Friedland, whatever it might be. But that would mean sending Berta, Fiona, and the other residents of Friedland to war.

“That’s really not what I want to do…” He gave a long sigh and hung his head. Perhaps it had been too much to hope that he could ignore the future when he had slaughtered members of the True Church in revenge for Jirina. But now he had no urge to go out and kill anyone. All he wanted was to protect those around him.

But Veronika said curtly, “It doesn’t really matter what you want. If you don’t, someday, someone is going to get the better of you.” Suddenly an edge entered her voice, the sound of a wounded young woman. “I should know. That’s how I lost my father, and my home.”

Yukinari couldn’t argue. In his previous life, he had keenly felt his own helplessness all too many times. He didn’t know what had happened to Veronika, but whatever it was, it hadn’t kept her from surviving to this day.

Veronika said dispassionately, “If you want to try talking to them, first make them come crawling to you. Otherwise, you can never expect them to listen to what you say.”

●

Tension lay thick on the town of Aldreil.

Two of the three units of the Missionary Order stationed there were preparing to move out. They obviously weren’t going on a civilizing expedition. They were going to war. They had clearly found an enemy and were getting ready to move against them. And if two units were going together, many casualties could be expected.

Two of the three statues of the guardian saint that loomed in the town square were undergoing maintenance so they could come to the battlefield. The people of Aldreil observed this with a mix of horror and resignation, hurrying by with their eyes downcast.

“The Eighth Missionary Brigade will attack Friedland directly from the front.” With the statues towering behind her, Angela Jindel was addressing the assembled Ninth Missionary brigade. “As for the Ninth Brigade, we’ll take a roundabout route past the mountains to catch them in a pincer movement. In addition, as Captain Bateson hasn’t yet recovered, I myself will command on the field. Any objections?”

The knights of the Ninth Missionary Brigade were silent. Some nodded in allegiance to Angela as she looked around the unit, but no one shook

their head. She was the vice-captain anyway, and she was the one who had brought back word of what was happening in Friedland. With her knowledge of the situation, there was no one better suited to command—and no one who wanted to be out front in a battle whose purpose was to clean up the Sixth Brigade's mess.

"In that case, I'll give you the detailed orders. Starting with First Squadron..."

With one satisfied nod, Angela pointed to a map open on the desk in front of her and began to tell each squadron in her brigade what they would do.

●

Friedland appeared to remain peaceful, at least outwardly. Or anyway, to Berta's eyes, it looked the same as always. Fiona had decided that changing too much would create anxiety among the townspeople, so she ordered most of the inhabitants to stick to their normal routines, even as she spread the word about the possibility of an impending attack from the missionaries.

Hence the farming and the development of the fields went on as before. If they abandoned the farms, then it wouldn't matter if they stopped the invaders; there would likely be a famine. At the same time, however, they temporarily ceased any relatively complex work where Yukinari would have to give instructions.

As preparation, they introduced a group of people—the young men who had formerly been the town's volunteer safety force—to Veronika, who divided them into groups and began instructing them in various things that would be helpful in combat, like the use of guns, how to move as a unit, and how to communicate between units. As we've said, though, she did this quietly, to allow people to continue their lives and not unsettle them.

Yukinari set about using his powers as an angel to produce bullets for Derrringer and Durandall. He also set up some traps they could use if the missionaries showed up with a statue, which they likely would.

And Berta? She was doing as she had done so many days recently: she was up on the observation tower, practicing sniping.

But neither Yukinari nor Dasa was with her. They, of course, were busy getting things ready in town, and Veronika was training the young men. So Ulrike had come along to keep her safe, just in case.

Finger on the trigger—pull.

A hit. Pull the trigger again. A hit.

Open the gun, eject the spent rounds, load in the new ones she held in her left hand, close the gun again. And then pull the trigger, and then again.

She repeated this for a long time. Even she thought she was getting better.

She was probably the best shooter in Friedland when it came to Derrringer. Some of it may have been talent, and she had an affinity for the sniper rifle. Incidentally, the gun Berta was using was the first one Yukinari

had produced, the one she was most used to—even if Yukinari claimed the later guns were no different from this one.

Shoot. Shoot. Tilt the gun and eject. Load. Return the gun.

Shoot. Shoot. Tilt the gun and eject. Load. Return the gun.

Shoot. Shoot. Tilt the gun and eject. Load. Return the gun.

The target was already much reduced in size, but Berta could still hit it. Berta felt at one with Derrringer. She didn't feel like she pulled the trigger so much as the gun let her pull the trigger, and perhaps that was why she did so well.

Berta knew nothing about difficult military matters. But Veronika said that if an opponent came to Friedland with a large army, they were likely to do so from two directions. Because the missionaries would probably bring their statues of the guardian saint, they would have to take a road that could accommodate the huge wagons that carried the statues.

Of course, they might well split up to encircle the town, but that probably wouldn't be until they were closer. There would be no point to splitting their forces while they were still far away, spreading part of their army across the trackless countryside.

It was most likely, Veronika said, that the attackers would comprise two of the missionary brigades. In other words, Friedland would fundamentally have to be on the alert in two directions at once.

As was obvious from the fact that Yukinari himself had passed by the sanctuary when he first arrived, one of those directions would be the one in which his sanctuary lay. That meant this observation platform would be a superb sniper nest. Berta had already been practicing for several days, so she knew how the temperature changed around here, had a sense for how the wind would blow. From this position, she was likely to score plenty of hits.

But…

"Oh…"

Looking through the scope, Berta let out a noise. Her concentration faltered, and the hand that held Derrringer shook. In the wobbling field of view, there was a lone rabbit.

She didn't know if it was the same one as before. But she focused her attention and lined up the sights with the animal, willing herself to pull the trigger.

But she couldn't shoot. When she tried, she put too much force into her hand, and the gun trembled. The one-ness was gone.

"I can't do it," she groaned, taking her eye away from the scope.

Pathetic.

She finally had a chance to be helpful to Yukinari. He had seen something in her, a talent, an ability, something she could do better than anyone else. This was her chance for Yukinari to see her worth, for her to repay him for saving her life.

And yet she couldn't shoot one wild hare.

If this was how she acted with an animal, it didn't suggest she would be able to kill a human.

It was pathetic. She always stumbled, whatever she did. She didn't seem able to do anything.

"I'm… I'm so…"

"How is your training proceeding? According to plan?"

Berta almost jumped at the voice, and turned around. "Lady… Lady Ulrike…?"

She felt a little strange saying it. The girl in front of her was Ulrike, there was no question about that. But now she looked so different from her usual self that she was almost like another person. Her aura was sterner.

Ulrike seemed to have picked up on Berta's hesitance.

"Are you afraid?"

"Er, yes… I'm sorry, forgive me."

This earnest apology brought a smile to Ulrike's face; she shook her head. "Pay it no mind. I've simply deemphasized Ulrike's personality a bit."

Although it was Ulrike's body standing before her and speaking, the way it spoke indicated that it was the plant-based erdgod Yggdra talking. Normally, Ulrike's human personality was front and center because that made it easy to get along with Yukinari and the others, and her words and actions would reflect that. But now, Yggdra's consciousness was taking precedence.

"Can you not kill?"

"Er… Oh." It seemed Ulrike knew what was happening. "Oh, uh… I'm sorry…"

But Ulrike actually looked at Berta with compassion. "It is well understandable. You are a girl with a kind heart. Yukinari surely knows that. He does not believe you will fight in the way he does."

"You mean…"

So he really didn't have any hopes for her, after all.

Or perhaps...

"Part of him is conflicted about whether it is right to make you do this thing. But there is no room for soft-heartedness now. Our backs are, as they say, against the wall." Suddenly, Ulrike's face went expressionless. "If I could fight enough for both of us, then there would be no problem."

"Lady Ulrike… I mean, Lady Yggdra? But this is Friedland's battle…"

"Most likely, if Friedland falls, Rostruch will be next," Ulrike said quietly. "It is even possible my city was their target all along, given that Friedland is already nominally home to the Missionary Order."

The reason there were three missionary units in Aldreil wasn't because it took that many of them to keep the place under control. It was so they could send two of the units to points more remote. Aldreil was just a way station, and two of the units were just stopping over. It wouldn't be surprising if their ultimate destination was Rostruch.

"What Veronika said is not ideal, but it is the truth."

“What…?”

“Thus I will resist as I am able. That’s all.”

When she finished speaking, Ulrike looked at the ground below the platform. Berta followed her gaze and found that a dozen or more human figures had gathered there. At first she thought they were Friedlanders, but when she looked closer, she didn’t see anyone she recognized.

Not only that, but from their heads grew horns—or rather, branches—much like Ulrike had.

“They are my familiars, as Ulrike is.” This was certainly Yggdra, the force behind Ulrike, speaking.

“Have they come to help protect this town…?” Berta asked.

If so, there could be no more encouraging ally. Yukinari had told Berta that Yggdra was far more powerful than the erdgod that had previously ruled over Friedland. Yukinari had been able to defeat that deity with ease, but in the fight with Yggdra, he had been hard-pressed. He had even said that if the situation had been less favorable to him, he might have lost.

In other words, this god was as powerful as Yukinari, or maybe even more. And she had sent several of her familiars, her hands and feet. But…

“They may not live up to your expectations,” Ulrike said with a frown. “At root, I am a plant who cannot move. Though I can use my familiars to send my power to distant places, the farther they are from my body, from Rostruch, the weaker my power becomes. I’ve placed my ‘children,’ sprouts from my own body, as intermediaries, but they are still growing, and I fear they won’t be ready in time to stop the missionaries’ attack.”

“But… That means…”

Ulrike—or rather, Yggdra—was proposing to fight at a disadvantage. It was Friedland that would be under attack; if she wanted, the god could choose to abandon the town, save her strength, and fortify herself in Rostruch.

“There is no question. If I do not fight here, I will lose him.” Yggdra looked back at Friedland as she spoke. “My friend, Yukinari.”

Berta was startled.

“Yukinari is the erdgod of this land and a traitor to the Church. When the missionaries learn that, I cannot imagine they’ll let him live. You others might be spared if you convert, but Yukinari will surely be killed.”

“No—!”

Yukinari would die.

The possibility hadn’t occurred to her. Even given his powers as an angel, he was not so different from a human of flesh and blood. He was soft and warm to the touch, he ate and drank as Berta and the others did. He was, really, a living thing with blood flowing through his veins—or to put it another way, if his heart were pierced, his head cut off, he would die.

“I… I hadn’t… hadn’t even thought about that…”

“If you cherish Yukinari, then protect him with your power. If you do what you can do, it will naturally protect him.”

So saying, Ulrike patted Derrringer's barrel.

●

There was no telling when the missionaries would come from Aldreil, so Yukinari paid particular attention to their likely invasion routes. Specifically, he set up shop at the town gate in the opposite direction from the sanctuary and the observation platform, so he could respond to a threat at any time.

This gate opened onto the wide main road and was the largest of Friedland's entryways. It could be considered the town's main gate.

"How*ever*..." Yukinari said, looking at his partner.

"What?" Dasa asked, cocking her head.

She was at Yukinari's side as if it were the most natural thing in the world. He had suggested she stay at the Schillings mansion so she would be out of immediate danger if a battle started, but she showed no sign of listening. Indeed, carrying Red Chili in one hand, she seemed determined not to stay anywhere but with Yukinari.

"Waiting is the worst," Yukinari said.

"That's because you need the patience—the strength of spirit—to keep your anxiousness under control."

The reply came from Veronika, dressed for combat. Her wounds weren't fully healed yet, but she insisted she could still fight, so she was there too. Behind her were several of the town youth she had trained, standing with Durandalls in hand. They had long helped with public security, handling fights and petty crime, but they had never been anything more than a community watch. They had no experience in fighting unit to unit or wielding deadly weapons, and it wasn't clear even now that they really understood what would be demanded of them. Veronika had only had a few days to train them, but went ahead on the supposition that something was better than nothing.

Yukinari had had no choice but to use them; he simply didn't have enough people.

"When the battle starts, we'll get the fieldworkers into the town. At the same time, the runners will go alert the other fifty members of the community watch, who will go to where either Yukinari or Ulrike is waiting."

She had trained nearly eighty people, but because there wasn't spare time or resources to create enough Durandalls or Derrringers, let alone enough bullets, only about half that number would be able to fight with gun in hand. The rest would handle support, communications, and distribution of resources.

Yukinari and Dasa had set traps along the two routes most likely to be used for an invasion, and if they worked, they would slow the enemy down somewhat. It would be ideal if they frightened the knights enough to send them running home, but Yukinari wasn't expecting it.

"Yukinari."

He turned around to find Fiona standing there. Since an attack might come at any time now, she was going around and warning people. Those working in the fields had been informed, as had the hunters and charcoal makers who were out in the vicinity. If any of them spotted hide or hair of the missionaries, word would come quickly.

“I’m pretty much done letting everyone know.”

“Good. Thanks for your help,” Yukinari said. Then he sighed. “I didn’t want to worry everyone if I could help it, but there was no other choice.”

“Yukinari…?” Fiona frowned, looking puzzled. “Something’s been bothering me.”

“What is it? If you’re concerned about anything, now’s the time…”

“You… You don’t really think that you can or even should face the Missionary Order alone, do you?”

For an instant Yukinari failed to understand; he said nothing. Actually, that *was* what he thought, or at least what he wanted. He was in the role of the protector-god of this town, even if he hadn’t asked for it.

“If nothing else, I think that if I destroy the statue of the guardian saint, they’ll lose the will to fight, just like Arlen and his friends did. If everyone else can help stall until I do that—”

She cut him off angrily. “That’s not what I meant! I’m saying I think you might be underestimating them! Each unit of the Order has a statue, so wouldn’t two units mean two statues? Even if you destroyed one, what would you do about the second?”

“Ah, that’s why I’ve got Ulrike out there.”

Granted, they were so far from Rostruch that Ulrike couldn’t use her full power. But even so, there was a significant forest near the observation platform. As the familiar of the plant-based erdgod Yggdra, Ulrike should literally be able to use the terrain to her advantage. And the familiars had physical abilities far exceeding those of normal humans. They might well be able to throw off the missionaries.

“But the missionaries here won’t know what’s happening on the other side of town, will they?”

“Er… Y-Yeah, but…”

“So even if you destroyed their statue, they’ll think they still have a lifeline left. How can you be sure they’ll stop fighting?”

Yukinari was silent.

“Yuki…” Dasa touched Yukinari’s hand, concerned. He had always fought alone—or rather, together with her. They had defeated their opponents as if batting away sparks: as long as they protected themselves, that was enough. As long as they brought down the enemy in front of them, that was all they had to worry about. There had been no need to look past the enemy to what came next. Until now.

“We need you to destroy the statue of the guardian saint,” Fiona said. “That’s the one thing we can’t do, no matter how hard we try. But we can’t know if that will be the end of it. If the missionaries don’t lose the will to

fight, the townspeople are going to have to join the battle. Including me and Berta!”

He still said nothing. He couldn’t. Fiona was telling him, in essence, not to try to do everything himself. Yukinari had really seen fighting as his job. The townspeople, everyone else, was just helping.

That was why he always felt, somehow, apologetic. If he were more overwhelmingly powerful, he wouldn’t have to put them in danger, ask them to do such awful things.

Berta couldn’t shoot a rabbit. And there were surely others who, like her, hesitated to fight. It wasn’t something as contemptible as cowardice, though. Indeed, Yukinari thought it was the right way to feel as a human being. That was exactly why he hated this situation where those people were compelled to fight. He felt something like guilt.

“Don’t lose heart, O mighty god,” Fiona said, looking him in the face. “You’ve done everything you can for us, and you’re still doing it. Gods give blessings to their believers, right? But the believers owe something to the gods for those blessings. We aren’t just little birds that open our mouths to be fed. Nothing in this world comes without a price. We want to do what we can to help you and to protect our town. We can’t help if you’re holding out on us.”

Yukinari was silent.

“I think she’s got you there, O Yukinari, god of Friedland,” Veronika said with a wry grin. He looked at her and found that the young people behind her were all nodding. All of them looked afraid—but at the same time, resolute.

“I understand,” he said. “Thank you. I’ll remember that.”

And then—

“They’re heeeeere!”

A cry broke out, almost as though it had been waiting for a beat in their conversation. He looked and saw several townspeople in farm clothes rushing toward the gate. They didn’t even have their tools; they looked panicked.

“All right.”

Yukinari and the others nodded at each other.

“Yukinari, be careful,” Fiona said.

“I will,” he said, and then Fiona and the runners set off into town to warn everyone that the battle was beginning.

●

Berta spotted something portentous from her perch on the observation tower. Coming down the road that swept lazily around the forest, she saw first one and then another mounted, armored figure appear. They formed a long, thin column, never ceasing in their advance toward Friedland.

“…Erk…”

They were frightening, Berta thought. She no longer felt anything in particular when she looked at Arlen and the other knights who lived in

town, but these missionaries coming from the far side of the woods—they were dressed the same, yet they left her feeling intensely pressured. They were still quite some distance away, but she found herself frozen in place. The terror was like a bladed weapon at her throat.

It took her a moment to realize that what she was feeling was the collective hostility, the murderous intent, given off by the approaching enemy. Berta had been present at several of Yukinari's battles, but most of those had been against xenobeasts or demigods, and it was Yukinari that they had been focused on.

But now it was she herself who bore the brunt of their hatred, even though they probably didn't yet know she was there. There was nothing different about the opponent. But Berta now faced them with the intent to fight them, and as a result she suddenly felt something she had never felt before, was sensitive to the hostile aura as she'd never been.

"I— I…"

Can I do it? The anxiety welled up in her chest once again. Could she shoot at them? She didn't know. But if they weren't stopped, they would certainly destroy the town. Even worse, Yukinari would be killed.

Berta felt a thin line of sweat trickle down from her forehead. She gripped Derrringer so tightly her hands started to hurt. It seemed so much heavier than it had when she was practicing. This weapon was designed to unilaterally take the life from another person. She was setting out to kill.

She was silent. She wouldn't shoot yet. There was no point shooting until they were close enough to hit, she told herself. Almost like an excuse. As if anything would change if she delayed the act by a few seconds.

Some seventy missionary knights had appeared from the woods. Behind them, a massive horse-drawn wagon rumbled along. Twenty people walked alongside to guard it. A cloth was draped over the cargo so it couldn't be seen—but most likely, it was a statue of the guardian saint.

And then…

"You shall go no farther—halt!"

A voice thundered out. In front of the confused knights stood a young girl and several followers, blocking their way.

It was Ulrike and other familiars of Yggdra. They were young and old, male and female, but their hair was green, and each had horns growing from their head. But the strange shape of the horns meant that at a glance, someone might assume they had simply dyed their hair and that the horns were hand-made ornaments.

Berta was far enough away that she couldn't see exactly what was happening, but she could make out the dubious faces of the missionaries.

"Who or what are you?" the mounted knight at the front of the column asked in a loud voice. "This is no place for children. Out of our way!"

Of course, Ulrike was nowhere near as far away from the knight as Berta was. They could easily have heard each other without shouting. Yet instead the knight spoke loudly enough for Berta to hear every word, presumably in

an attempt to intimidate Ulrike. Her position at the head of the group of familiars made it obvious that she was leading them. No doubt the knight thought that since she was just a child, he could scare her away with a little shouting and she would let him through.

He didn't know what a mistake he was making.

"Quite a noisy one, you are. What do you think? That if you shout loud enough, I will move?" Ulrike herself spoke loudly as she said this. This was probably out of consideration on her part, so Berta could hear what was going on. In a taunting tone, she continued, "Which of us is more childish?"

"You impudent brat!"

The knights' attitude got prickly in a hurry. Apparently, they couldn't endure being mocked by a child.

"Ah, listen to these young wolves howl about impudence," Ulrike laughed, and then all the familiars laughed with her.

Did the missionaries notice? Notice that they were all laughing with exactly the same cadence? What they were confronted with was not what it appeared. Even Ulrike had actually been born centuries before. She could very well consider the knights to be nothing more than children.

"I am Ulrike, the most ancient familiar of the erdgod Yggdra."

"What? What did you say…?!"

Confusion began to spread among the missionaries, and it was understandable. An erdgod like Yggdra was very unusual. She didn't look anything like erdgods as the missionaries usually pictured them, which was basically as overgrown xenobeasts with their fangs bared, lusting for human flesh. Some might have surprisingly human-like faces, but they had never seen an erdgod that appeared as an *actual* human.

"Allow me to enlighten you, you ignorant cohort. We are both the erdgod Yggdra and her familiars. We are individual in unity, united in our individuality, and we live by a different law than you!"

"An erdgod?!"

The missionaries' amazement was clear even from where Berta was watching. However, they were a group whose primary mission in new lands was to exterminate the local erdgod. They didn't break ranks, but the men out in front retreated a little, solidifying the column.

"Her? An erdgod?"

"So maybe the Sixth Brigade really was ambushed…?"

Apparently, they took Yggdra to be Friedland's erdgod and assumed it was she who had attacked and destroyed Arlen and the others. Ulrike was careful not to speak of Rostruch.

"I do not recognize your right to set foot upon this land," Ulrike said, once again in her most commanding tone. "If you depart swiftly, I shall overlook this offense." Perhaps she was hoping to intimidate the enemy, drive them away if possible, and if not, then to buy time with talking.

"An enemy…"

"An enemy…!"

“Enemy!!”

But her words seemed to have the opposite effect. Berta could feel the hostility spreading through the missionary unit. Even as they shouted, they started moving quickly, getting into formation—preparing for battle.

It didn’t look like there was any more time for talk. Perhaps Ulrike realized this, too, because she took a step back. The missionaries must have taken it as a gesture of fear, for they appeared inspired; someone who seemed to be their commander shouted, “Draw swords!”

The other knights all did so. Their silver blades glinted in the sun. Next to the trees with all their greenery and life, the swords looked cold and deadly, out of place.

Battle cries could be heard among the knights:

“Smite this freakish monster!”

“Let the light of knowledge shine in the world!”

“For our God!”

All hesitation and fear had vanished from them. Their opponent might be a child and unarmed, but once they saw her as an enemy, they would strike her down without question. All of it justified in the name of doctrine—the strength of the knights of the True Church of Harris was their ability to let circumstances dictate what was and wasn’t sinful.

Ulrike’s party, on the other hand, had no weapons to ready. Because the familiars hardly knew what a weapon was, it only made sense.

“May your foolishness be on your own heads!”

Ulrike, who had been standing calmly, now produced a tool of some kind —Yukinari had told Berta it was called a “sacred branch”— and spun around once, as if she were dancing.

In that instant, several of the knights pitched forward, along with the horses they were riding.

“Wha—?!”

All they had done was charge forward, yet the casualties were immense. The ten men up front had been thrown from their mounts, a serious fall when covered in armor. Bruises were the best you could hope for; the unlucky got broken bones. And in some cases, their horse fell on top of them.

None of the knights who had fallen got up, but lay on the ground groaning.

“What the hell?!”

“She’s got some strange magic—!”

The next group of knights had just managed to avoid being thrown, but now they were anxious. Looking closely at the ground for traps, they might have noticed—half-hidden by leaf mold, something was knitting itself together. Vines.

No one vine was very strong, but several together were enough to trip a horse. Ulrike and the others had planted the seeds ahead of time, and now they were being made to grow quickly through Yggdra’s power.

On top of that, something began to sketch a circle around Ulrike before bursting through the ground. They were wooden clubs. They were large, long, and covered in spikes. They had handles, but they weren’t two separate pieces; the entirety of each appeared to have been carved out of a single tree trunk.

“Wha?!”

The knights apparently judged a charge on horseback too dangerous, because they dismounted and prepared to advance on foot. The familiars grabbed the clubs and came at them.

“Hrgh?!”

One knight took a blow from an old woman and found the sword knocked clean out of his hand. At first glance, it looked impossible, comedic, as though they were both acting.

“Why, these—!”

Another knight thrust at a little girl familiar who had come up beside him. He brought his sword down at her head, but she deflected the blow easily with her club. This was a strike offered by a fully armored knight from directly overhead with a heavy sword. The weapon didn’t even bite into the club, but stopped at little more than a shallow gouge.

It’s widely believed that wood floats in water, but in fact, some types of wood sink. Many such woods are not only heavy but extremely tough. The clubs the familiars were using must have been made of such material. They had more than enough strength to make worthy weapons.

“M-Monsters!” the knights cried out, faced with the incredible fighting power of Ulrike and the other familiars. But they were well-trained; they didn’t rout.

The missionaries cut at the familiars again and again. Since strikes from overhead didn’t work, they swept in from the side. When the familiars blocked this move, they aimed for the feet. This, too, was rebuffed, but the familiars were growing hard-pressed.

The familiars were strong. In terms of sheer physical strength, they were well beyond the knights, and quick as well. Against wild animals or untrained amateurs, they would likely have been overwhelming.

But the knights had a special skill: martial training. They weren’t as powerful, but their technique was better than that of the familiars. The inefficiency of movement that could be witnessed in the familiars was almost nonexistent in the missionaries. It gave birth to a strange kind of stalemate.

As Ulrike had told Berta, because the familiars were so far from Rostruch, they couldn’t use the kind of strength they had as they’d fought Yukinari. Nor could they control the growth of the local plant life, using it as a weapon itself. The most they could do was to set traps, but that took time. Ulrike’s mocking chatter was intended to buy that time.

“Damn, this isn’t getting us anywhere!” the commander shouted. “This calls for the guardian saint. The saint!”

A cheer went up from the knights. “The guardian saint is coming! The guardian saint is comingggg!”

The men disengaged from the familiars, falling back even as they began to chant passages from scripture. At the same time, the horse-drawn wagon

turned a large circle, coming to a halt with the luggage cart in back now facing forward. Near the driver's seat was some kind of keyboard instrument. One of the knights went over to it, opened the lid, and began to play quickly.

The deep notes of an organ filled the air. And then, slowly, it rose.

Berta swallowed heavily. It was huge. It shouldn't have been any larger than the last one she'd seen, yet it seemed massive enough to overwhelm her. The cloth fell from around the metal giant, which was several times the height of a person, as if the statue were removing its coat.

The statue of the guardian saint. The Missionary Order's ultimate weapon.

"Go!" one of the knights called. "Show these evil monsters the wrath of God!"

The saint moved forward, as if it were doing as instructed. The knights, in contrast, retreated somewhat, perhaps to guard against being caught up in what came next. The familiars formed a half-circle around the statue.

"Is this the Church's puppet of which Yukinari spoke?" Ulrike asked. All at the same moment, the familiars raised their clubs and attacked the thing's feet. The appendages rang out with *boom*s like a ringing bell. But that was it. The giant didn't so much as stumble. Its armor was thick, its body was heavy, and even all the familiars together could not destroy it or drive it back.

Undaunted, they continued their attacks. They always aimed at the feet and legs. The difference in height meant those were their only possible targets. When striking the feet didn't work, they tried the shins and the ankles and the toes, places that were normally human weak points, but there was no effect. And then...

"No! Move!" Perhaps Ulrike sensed something was about to happen; at the same moment as she shouted, the familiars scattered. The instant after that, flame poured out in all directions from the guardian saint's waist. Where the fire touched the familiars' clothes, they began to burn. But they didn't panic or cry out; they simply lopped off the burning part. As humans, they were already effectively dead; why should they be afraid of any of this?

"So they use fire..." Ulrike growled.

Steel and fire. Two things no animal used—these were the signs of human strength. Fire, in particular, could be said to be the one weak point of the plant-based Yggdra. The familiars did not appear to be shaken, but Yggdra's main body must have felt something like fear.

"Behold! God's wrath has driven back the beasts!"

Another cheer went up. It was not, of course, God's wrath, just a little fire—but nobody there would have cared about the distinction. The statue of the guardian saint began advancing toward Friedland step by step. Apparently they were going to focus on their main goal of invading the town, rather than bothering to destroy each and every one of the familiars.

“Hrrgh...” Ulrike grimaced, and all together the familiars began to pull on the vines hidden underground. They were the same vines that had tripped the horses earlier; now they emerged from the leaf mold to trap the statue. They would catch its feet, keep it from moving. But...

“Holy, holy, holy, holy, holy, holy!”

The chanting of the knights and the somber melody of the organ rang out. The next instant, the statue of the guardian saint drew a giant sword, cutting away the vines that entrapped it.

It was going to be difficult for the familiars alone to stop the statue.

“I... I...”

Berta gripped Derrringer’s stock. It was pointless just to sit and watch. What were all those hundreds of practice rounds for? She had to shoot, here and now. Otherwise, she couldn’t help Yukinari. She couldn’t protect him.

She saw the statue of the guardian saint through the scope’s field of view, walking proudly. She held her breath, focused all her concentration on her eye and her finger, and waited for the perfect moment.

●

The massive sword came down hard enough to split the air. Yukinari threw himself out of the way. The blade slammed into the ground, carving a gouge. The size of the sword and the power the statue could produce were, perhaps, miracles in their own way. At the least, the blow was far more powerful than anything a human could have doled out.

Even Yukinari wouldn’t have survived if it had hit him head on. The missionaries, already aware that Yukinari had defeated Arlen’s unit, appeared to have come resolved. No sooner had they seen each other than the knights brought out their statue.

If anything, it was Yukinari who was deprived of the opportunity to bring his full strength to bear—to transform into the Blue Angel. And what was more...

“Hey, hey, hey...!” Yukinari frowned. Even though the statue was active, the missionary knights hadn’t retreated. They didn’t fear getting caught up in whatever the statue would do. Perhaps they had discussed the tactics ahead of time, or perhaps they simply weren’t afraid of dying.

Yukinari managed to dodge an attack from the statue of the guardian saint, only to find himself set upon by a group of knights.

There weren’t that many of them. They didn’t assume any particular formation, but just came at him in a wave—yet they timed their attacks so each was striking at a different moment. With his excellent vision and physical abilities, Yukinari was able to dodge them, but he couldn’t buy himself enough time to transform into the Blue Angel.

The knights suddenly parted, and in between them the giant blade came crashing down. Yukinari twisted, ignoring the fact that this threw him off-balance, and just managed to dodge the blow. He felt the wind from the passing weapon brush his cheek. A few centimeters closer and it would have crushed his skull. For that matter, a few millimeters and it would have

mangled his arm. It would have been possible to regenerate the limb using his powers, but it would have left him vulnerable for a moment. If the knights had come at him in that instant, he would have had no defense.

"I knew these things were dangerous."

While the statue of the guardian saint could be very quick, it was only individual movements, like a slice or a kick, that were fast. If, for example, one of its attacks was dodged, the way it resumed its fighting stance and prepared for the next attack would appear sluggish. This was because the statue's movements were actually a collection of small single motions. For example, bring down its sword, take a step forward. Because the moves were loaded in ahead of time, like a machine, it could execute them as quickly as its construction allowed. But combining these with other movements fell to the missionaries on the scene, leading to natural limits.

The result was a strangely staccato look to its motions. But as with a serpent, it also made the statue difficult to predict.

It would be simplest to go get the guy who's controlling it, but...

There were a huge number of tuning forks all over the statue's body, chiefly on its back, which acted as receptors. These allowed the notes that came from the organ on the transport wagon to control the statue. In other words, if he could stop the knight playing the organ, then he could render the statue powerless even if he didn't destroy it.

But with the statue and the waves of missionaries, Yukinari couldn't get within Durandall's effective range. He could just shoot from the hip, hoping for a lucky hit, but he would hate for the enemy to close ranks because they'd been alerted to the gun's power. It was the music that was giving the orders to the statue, so if they managed to hide the organ from him, he would be out of luck.

But still…

The commander this time is really pushing it.

The statue of the guardian saint, as we've explained, executed movements inputted ahead of time by the missionaries. Therefore, it wasn't capable of taking delicate aim or quickly changing the direction of its attack, as a normal human would be.

This left the missionaries out front in an awfully precarious position. Even if they had discussed everything ahead of time, one wrong step could see them caught by the statue's sword just as if they were an enemy.

Yukinari just couldn't get close enough. For close-quarters combat, the statue was equipped with the ability to spew fire from its waist. But because of all the knights around it, it wasn't using that ability. If he could just get past the missionaries, it would be easy for him to destroy the statue.

Yukinari was startled by the clang of swords behind him. He glanced back to see Veronika holding several missionaries at bay with her halberd. This was another group, distinct from that which had been launching wave attacks at Yukinari; this group had tried to circle around to one side to get to the town. Veronika had stopped them single-handedly.

“Yuki…!”

The voice was accompanied by a gunshot. A missionary knight who had snuck around behind Yukinari pitched forward and fell to the ground. Two of those facing Veronika also fell in quick succession. Dasa was supporting her comrades from the vicinity of the town gate with Red Chili. There were also several townspeople holding Durandalls, but they were there simply to keep Dasa safe. They weren’t remotely capable of picking the enemies out of a chaotic battlefield scene.

“Hiyah!” Veronika took advantage of the temporary confusion sowed by Dasa’s attack to spear another missionary. She was lightly armored compared to the knights, her movements quicker. Her halberd, longer than a sword, found the chinks in enemy armor, stabbed, then moved on to the next target, whether or not her enemy had fallen. She was keeping the missionaries’ hands full, and they were also shaken by the sound of the gun.

“What was that?!”

“Thunder?! But—!”

They didn’t know what a gun was. They couldn’t see the bullets, and didn’t necessarily know where their opponent was shooting from immediately. They were focused on Yukinari and Veronika nearby and wouldn’t have believed the attack had come from Dasa, standing some distance away. Or perhaps they would mistake the attack as having come from Yukinari or Veronika.

“Fall back! Move the statue of the guardian saint forward! Forward!”

In the driver’s seat of the huge horse-drawn wagon, beside the organ that rang out the melody controlling the statue, a female knight was shouting. Apparently, observing from a detached position had allowed her to recognize where the gun was—or at least to see that the attack had come from Dasa’s direction.

The missionary knights began to retreat, and the statue moved forward. Yukinari stepped up, too, sensing an opportunity, but just as he was getting in range of the statue, he was blocked by a wall of flame.

“Bring out the crossbows! Ready!” Even as the knights retreated, they took the weapons off their backs and began to fire them from beside the advancing statue.

“Feh…!”

Yukinari batted the arrows away with Durandall. But there were too many for him to repel all at once, and iron-tipped bolts lodged themselves in his shoulder and thigh. He may have been an angel, but he still felt jolts of pain, collapsing to all fours.

“Yuki…!”

He heard Dasa shout, but he didn’t turn around as he called back, “Stay where you are!”

Then, overlapping with their voices, came a volley of gunfire that sounded like a thousand peals of thunder.

“Hrgh?!”

The knight who had shot Yukinari and was coming forward again now fell down, clutching his shoulder. At the same instant, bits of earth begin to dance up and down as if the ground itself were coming to a boil.

“We’ve got—We’ve got to help Lord Yukinari!” the Friedlanders beside Dasa exclaimed. They had all fired their Durandalls at once. “We’ve got to protect the town!”

“We can’t let those Church dogs do whatever they want!”

They grew more and more frenzied as they shouted. Arlen and his unit had already taken control of this town once. Perhaps that gave the townspeople an inkling of how they would be treated if the True Church of Harris took Friedland as a base. Combined with Veronika’s training, it was more than enough to inspire them to fight.

Of course, the one hit they’d scored was sheer luck; most of the bullets had buried themselves in the ground. When untrained amateurs shoot, they have a tendency to fire too low. Trying too hard to protect against kickback, they use too much strength when they pull the trigger—sometimes called “milking” it. Just hitting the target would be a huge task for these farmers.

However…

“Wh-What the hell was that?!”

“It was like last time…! Is this the erdgod’s curse?!”

“F-Fall back! Get behind the statue! Go!” Without waiting for the female knight’s instructions, the missionaries beat a retreat. They had been prepared to die in an accident with the statue, but even they found the incomprehensible attacks of an unfamiliar cult to be terrifying. They thought the gunshots were some form of dark magic.

“Send the statue forward!” the female knight shouted. “Forward!” The statue began to move. Flame wreathed its waist, and it spun the sword in its hand, making it all but impossible to approach.

“The statue! Get the statue!” The Friedlanders shot at the statue of the guardian saint with their Durandalls, but there was no effect. They had to aim upward at the monstrosity, so at least the bullets didn’t hit the ground this time, but the statue’s armor was too thick for a bullet to pierce. They simply flew into the air in a hail of sparks.

“Yukinari, now’s our chance.”

Veronika gave Yukinari her shoulder to lean on, crouching to support him as she began to retreat toward the town. But they hadn’t gone very far when Yukinari took Veronika’s hand and shook his head.

“I’m sorry. Could you pull out these arrows first?”

“You’ll only lose more blood.”

“It’s all right. Do it, quickly. I can’t concentrate with foreign objects lodged in my body.”

After a moment Veronika nodded, then set Yukinari down. The next instant, she brought the grip of her halberd—specifically, the metal butt—around with tremendous force, slamming it into the arrow lodged in Yukinari’s shoulder.

“Hrrgh!”

A bolt of pain shot through him, but the arrow popped out of his body. It was a way of getting the arrow out that would only have been possible for Veronika, with her considerable martial accomplishments. She then removed the arrow in his thigh in the same way. Blood began to flow from the wounds—although in actuality, Yukinari’s body was full of not blood, but something that looked like it.

“Yukinari!” Veronika shouted and shoved him out of the way, sending both of them tumbling. An instant later, the sword of the guardian saint statue came crashing down where they had just been.

“Veronika!”

“I’m fine—run!” she shouted as she rolled along the dirt.

Meanwhile…

“First, destroy that white-haired boy!”

The female knight was barking orders. She probably assumed that Yukinari, having been shot in the leg, would be unable to move easily.

“Yuki!”

“Lord Yukinari!”

Dasa and the Friedlanders let off another volley, but of course it was nowhere near enough to stop the armored wall that was the statue of the guardian saint.

Yukinari focused and tried to regenerate his body, but—

“Destroy him!”

In two steps, the statue had closed the distance to Yukinari and was raising its sword again. He still couldn’t find the space to transform or even heal himself.

“Thanks for driving the knights back a bit,” Yukinari muttered, and then he fired Durandall. Not at the statue, but at the ground right beside himself.

The roar shook the air around him.

“What?!” The woman was taken aback. As well she should have been—the movement of the ground had caused the statue, previously closing in on Yukinari, to pitch forward noticeably. Its right foot had sunk deep in the ground.

It was a trap Yukinari had laid ahead of time, a hole for the statue to fall into. Two full meters deep, the hole—more of a long chasm—had been covered with thin steel dusted with explosive powder, then hidden with earth.

If someone had been controlling the saint directly, it might have been possible to jump the hole despite its massive weight. But it wasn’t like someone was riding in the statue, inputting analog commands directly. It was a highly digital platform, essentially running on programming, and so, Yukinari had figured, it wouldn’t react well to sudden changes on the battlefield.

For example, if it were to get one foot stuck in a hole.

He obviously didn't think he could destroy the statue this way. Even a human wouldn't die from a two-meter drop, provided there weren't spikes at the bottom or anything. But controlling a mechanical puppet, especially a bipedal one, required a certain equilibrium. If it took a stumble, it would be hard for it to get back up.

"What do you think you're doing? Get up, quickly!"

The female knight was shouting in a panicked voice, but the statue only twitched, unable to right itself. It might have had preprogrammed instructions for getting itself up off the ground if it had fallen over, but with just one leg trapped in a hole, all of its instructions became confused, and the difficulty went up considerably.

Yukinari's original plan had been to get close to the statue while it struggled, trapped, and then physically reconstitute its legs or torso or the like into dust. But now, he focused his concentration on his own body.

Clap. He brought his hands together as if he were praying at a shrine. A bluish-white light appeared between them, and an instant later an all-encompassing brightness filled the area. It was the light of transfiguration, born when he reconstituted physical materials.

He reconstituted his own body, into a form that would allow him to make full use of his powers, more than he could ever do in human form.

"Th-That creature…" the female knight howled in shock. "It's the Blasphemer of Blue Steel…!"

Those who saw Yukinari's transformed body might have thought at first that he was a strange-looking knight in blue-black armor. His outfit bore no unnecessary decoration, and it fit snugly over his body, almost as if he had skin of steel.

The only exception, such as it was, were the wings on his back. Made of black crystal, they weren't intended for flying, but for dispersing the huge amounts of heat produced by physical reconstitution. The armor kept his body in place, and the wings dealt with the heat. By taking this form, Yukinari was able to use his powers as an angel to their fullest extent.

The cheers of the Friedlanders went up:

"Lord Yukinari has—"

"Our lord has arrayed himself for battle!"

"Lord Yukinari! Lord Yukinari!"

Yukinari could hear them cheering him on, but under his mask he gave a wry smile. He regretted to realize that he had indeed underestimated them. They weren't powerless creatures who could do nothing without him to protect them.

Perhaps they had been, back when they were relying on the providence of the erdgod to support them. But since Yukinari had become their "god," since they had been exposed to his thinking and behavior, they themselves had learned to approach things proactively.

The world could be changed. Destiny could be changed. If you didn't like the way things were, you could change them. That was what they had learned, and were learning.

That was why they took up arms against those who sought to control them. It was just as Fiona had said. Yukinari had thought the defense of Friedland was something he had to handle himself, just as he had once believed he didn't have to worry about the expansion of the Harris Church so long as he and Dasa weren't burned by its sparks.

But he couldn't think that way forever. If anything, Yukinari felt it was the villagers who had taught him that.

Sounds of shock and fear began to run among the missionaries. "The Blasphemer of Blue Steel—the fallen angel!"

The Blue Angel, otherwise known as the Bluesteel Blasphemer. These were the names they had given Yukinari, the monster who had ravaged the Harris Church in the capital. The incident had not been disclosed publicly, so as not to diminish the awe in which people held the Church, but many of the missionary knights knew about it. After all, many of the pillars of the Missionary Order had been killed, and the resulting reorganization had left plans for civilizing expeditions well behind schedule.

To them, the Bluesteel Blasphemer was like a nightmare. His existence could shake their very faith. But then…

"Y-You mustn't retreat! You mustn't be intimidated! You mustn't be afraid!" the female knight shouted, raising her sword, still in its scabbard. "We are the Missionary Order! We punish even demigods! We have no qualms about fighting an angel! Rally! Rally!"

Encouraged by her shouts, the knights readied themselves once more for combat. The organ's melody took on a crazed speed, and the statue of the guardian saint finally rose up with a great groan of its metal body.

"The battle begins now!"

"True enough," Yukinari said. "And it's gonna end real soon."

Then he began to work.

●

The air changed. Even shut away in the storehouse, they could feel it on their skin. It was a distinctive sensation; the air set them on edge, clung to them. The makeshift jail was built up against one wall, and if they got close to the wall it put them right beneath a window meant to let in fresh air. If they listened closely, they could hear gunshots like distant thunder, and some sound of a heavy impact. Most likely the statue of the guardian saint.

The town itself was so quiet that other sounds from outside the building were unusually audible. The townspeople must have been holed up in their houses, holding their collective breath.

Arlen dropped his eyes to look at the object in his hand. If he used it, he could almost certainly break out. Then they could take back their confiscated weapons and armor, rush onto the battlefield, and execute a pincer attack against Yukinari and Veronika. However strong Yukinari

might be, even he couldn't defend against an attack from behind. If they had Fiona as a hostage, so much the better.

Admittedly, he wasn't sure taking hostages befitted the honorable stature of a knight of the Missionary Order. But the True Church of Harris did, in essence, teach that almost anything was acceptable if it was done in the name of spreading the true teachings.

Arlen quickly set to work. The other knights watched him with surprise, but none of them said anything; they only kept an eye out.

As he cut the rope, Arlen imagined what would happen if Angela and her forces succeeded in felling Yukinari. The town would change, no doubt. The "conversion" that Arlen and the others had attempted would be completed. The people would be collared with the Holy Mark, like yokes on cattle, and any who dared to rebel would suffer. Like cattle, indeed. For things to go according to plan, the people must first of all be controlled.

Arlen remembered the looks of terror on the townspeople's faces when he first came to Friedland. Back then, he believed this was natural, indeed honorable. It was to be valued, for it would be to the people's benefit. Even if there was a moment of pain or fear born of their insubordination, it was necessary, in order to awaken them to the higher doctrine offered by the Harris Church.

The teachings of the True Church of Harris were wonderful. Arlen firmly believed this. But...

It's true that I'm grateful to you, though. I'll make you something sweet for when you're done working today—savor the anticipation!

Uh huh! Thank you, Mister Lord Lansdowne!

You've got my gratitude, too. Thanks. Fiona told me how you protected her, and those kids, and pretty much the entire town. I mean, while I was away.

Arlen found himself frowning. He had indeed fought to protect Friedland when that flying demigod attacked. It wasn't from any particular empathy for the townspeople, or an attempt to gain their admiration. He hadn't really thought about it at all. His body had acted almost of its own accord. When Fiona had asked him why he'd done it, he'd made up something about protecting those who might become believers. But he hadn't thought that deeply about it.

If he had to explain it, maybe all he could say was that he couldn't stand to see that hideous monster destroying humans. What he had been given as a result was not money, or goods, or even honor. It was only a succession of sounds that didn't last any longer than he had stood there, something he could show to no one.

Words of thanks.

It’s easy enough to say thank you, even if you don’t mean it. Words are really just sounds, so they don’t mean anything. There’s no need to pay them any mind.

Arlen had cut through several strands of rope. He had created a space large enough that a single person might be able to push aside the wood slats and shove through. What happened next would be simple. The storehouse door could be opened easily from inside, or they could climb out the window, if they could reach it.

“Ahem, Mister Lansdowne…?” One of his companions spoke up hesitantly. “Surely you don’t mean to… leave…?”

He looked back at the knight. “Shouldn’t I?”

“But… That’s…”

Reluctance was written all over the missionaries’ faces. Apparently, they had been completely taken in by the Friedlanders’ treatment of them in this brief time, so much so that they even hesitated to break out of this jail out of consideration for their captors. Unlike those who had refused from the outset to cooperate in any way, among those who had been doing patrols and guarding trade caravans were many who felt no qualms at all about working with the locals.

Arlen stared down each of the knights in turn.

“I will follow who is strongest,” he told them. “That’s the path I believe in. As you know, the True Church of Harris is strong. Now, even kings and nobles can do nothing without first asking the view of the Church. The Harris Church is the strongest force in all the world, without question.”

“That’s…” The other knights looked at each other, but Arlen didn’t have to repeat himself. They all knew.

“That’s why I joined the Missionary Order.”

Those who were weak might howl or struggle alone, but they could change nothing. There were limits, too, to how strong a single individual could become. In order to remain free, it was necessary to seek the protection of someone stronger.

“Yet the Harris Church, although the strongest, is not invincible.”

“Wha…?”

This was unexpected, and the missionaries looked on in puzzlement.

“The Dominus Doctrinae was killed, as were many of the most important members of the Missionary Order. The culprit hasn’t yet been caught. He lives at his leisure, suffering not even the punishment of heaven.”

“You’re talking about—”

“Depending on how you look at it, it’s possible to see the Church as having lost.”

Silence from the others.

“I prefer those who are strong, and will follow them. It’s an article of faith for me. So—” Arlen looked around again. “I will join the side of the Bluesteel Blasphemer.”

After a befuddled second, a buzz ran among the missionaries. None of them had imagined that Arlen might be breaking out in order to fight on the side of Friedland.

"If anyone wishes to argue the point, let him come forward now. I'll knock him out here, before we become enemies on the field."

Nobody moved.

"I don't demand that any of you follow me. If you feel this is apostasy, unbearable, then stay in here with your eyes shut and your ears closed!" He shouted as loudly as he could, from the bottom of his lungs.

He was as good as announcing that he was going to betray the True Church of Harris. He had to put all his strength into it, or he could never have said the words. It was only natural that the other missionaries continued to look at him with confusion. It was not for nothing that they had read the scriptures avidly, chanted prayers morning and evening. The teachings of the Harris Church underlay all that they were.

Without waiting for their reaction, Arlen crawled out of the jail and set off running toward where he expected the weapons were being kept. If they hadn't been moved, they wouldn't be far from the storehouse where Arlen and the others were.

The day might come, sometime in the future when he regretted his actions. He might be embarrassed by them, consider them a momentary loss of sanity. But for now...

"To be thanked feels wonderful!"

Now, for no reason he could understand, a bright and clear expression was on Arlen's face.

●

She turned the gun sideways, opening the long body of the weapon in the middle; she pressed in new rounds and closed the stock again. She righted the gun and then looked down the sights, bringing the scope's crosshairs to bear on the statue of the guardian saint.

She held her breath, preventing the motion of her inhales and exhales from transferring to the gun. And then, just as she had practiced time and again, Berta pulled the trigger.

Boom.

The bullet was spat out with an earsplitting gunshot. According to Yukinari, the round was far more powerful than that in either Dasa's Red Chili or his own Durandall. The gun kicked back hard against her body as the bullet went flying.

It was more than powerful enough to tear through the puppet she'd used for target practice. But...

"Oh..." Berta breathed.

She had hit the statute. But it produced only a spark on the surface; the giant didn’t so much as stumble. She could see through the scope that there was a small scratch on its armor, but that was all.

“It… It didn’t work…?”

She wasn’t targeting a person, a living being. Hence Berta was able to pull the trigger with comparatively little reluctance. But if her shots had no effect, then it was all pointless.

“No…”

She held her breath, pulled the trigger again. Another bullet sped toward the statue, leaving another forceful recoil and thundering gunshot in its wake. And it produced only another spark.

Berta tilted the gun again, opening the stock, loading new rounds in place of the empty ones that had been automatically ejected. Thanks to all the practice she’d done, she hardly had to think about the process anymore. But it looked likely that no matter how many hits she landed, she wasn’t going to bring down the statue of the guardian saint.

Derrringer, as a weapon, worked on the same principle as Yukinari’s Durandall. Maybe he, or perhaps Dasa, might have been able to use it more effectively. Maybe she really was incompetent, incapable of helping.

The thought caused a profound sadness to well up in her chest, but she had no time to indulge it. The situation around the observation tower was a matter of one step forward and one back. Ulrike and the other familiars were giving battle well. They still weren’t able to use Yggdra’s full power, and their weapons and attacks weren’t powerful enough to destroy the statue. But the team of familiars had quickly adapted their thinking, targeting not the statue, but the knights beyond it.

With the knights, the familiars could fight on even footing, or perhaps even have the advantage. And precisely because the missionaries were under attack, the statue couldn’t ignore the familiars and move forward. The statue couldn’t move on its own, and in order for the organist who gave it its orders to advance, the huge wagon bearing the instrument would have to be brought forth, along with all its guards.

However, the battle between the missionary knights and the familiars was almost at a stalemate. At this rate, neither side looked likely to gain the upper hand. Right now, the only one who could act freely was Berta.

That meant she had to do something. If that statue succeeded in reaching the town, executing a pincer attack against Yukinari with the other statue, it wouldn’t matter how strong her lord was. He would never win.

“If I don’t… If I don’t do something…!” she murmured, and returned to sniping. Even if it wasn’t very effective, this was everything she could do. It was the job she’d been given. Clinging to that fact, she continued to work.

“Calm down… Calm down…” She repeated the words to herself over and over. Panic only caused you to miss things you should have hit. That was what Yukinari had taught her. So Berta dedicated herself to doing as he had

said. Calm down. Don't panic. Don't worry. Don't think. Only load, aim, fire, eject, as if you were a part of the gun.

But then…

"Hey, woman!"

"Wha?!"

She cried out as a voice suddenly came from behind her. Had the missionaries snuck around her position without her realizing it? Terror made her body go stiff; she let go of Derrringer and turned around. Turning the long, heavy gun around with her was impractical; Berta didn't even think about it.

"M-Mister A-Arlen…?"

To her surprise, it was Arlen standing there. Sweat pearled on his forehead, and his shoulders were heaving with his breath; he had obviously run as hard as he could to get here.

"What's the situation?!"

"Y-Yes, sir!"

"No, not 'Yes, sir!' I'm asking you what's going on!"

His fervent shouting only caused Berta to freeze up again. She knew Arlen, of course, but she had rarely spoken to him herself. So to find him exclaiming angrily at her was terrifying enough.

"Ahhh, fine, get out of the way!" Arlen didn't have time to wait patiently; he shoved Berta aside and knelt at the edge of the platform, observing the battle.

"So they did bring out the statue of the guardian saint—I knew it!"

His muttering made Berta think: Arlen had also had a guardian saint statue when he had come to Friedland. He knew the weapon well. Perhaps he could tell her where to aim—where its weak point might be.

"E-Er, L-Lord… Lansdowne…?"

Arlen spun. "Woman! Is this the 'sniper rifle' or whatever Yukinari called it? The gun that can strike an enemy even from this distance?"

"Oh! Y-Yes, it is! B-But that giant is too strong… When I hit it, nothing happens…"

"Of course not! Do you know how thick the armor is on those statues?!"

"I—I'm sorry…"

"You can't just shoot them anywhere and hope something will happen!" Arlen held up a hand to shield his eyes, squinting into the distance. It looked like he had something in mind. Berta looked at him expectantly, but…

"If you need a target, aim at the organist controlling the statue!"

"Wha?"

"The statue of the guardian saint is controlled by the music of the organ. If there's no one to supply the melody, it won't be able to move—so shoot him! The man on the seat on that wagon!"

Berta could say nothing.

The organist was a human.

“Shoot… Shoot a person…?”

“What’s wrong with you?! If shooting the statute doesn’t work, you shoot the person controlling the statue! It’s obvious!”

“But—But he’s a… a person…!”

A living thing, with blood running through his veins. A human, just like her.

And she was to shoot him. To kill him.

“That’s... That’s awful…!”

“Then why did you bring that thing here?!” Arlen asked angrily. “Those who aren’t prepared to kill shouldn’t have weapons! They shouldn’t be in battle!”

“I—I’m sorry… But…”

“Hrr—”

Arlen wasn’t listening to Berta’s excuses; he had turned back to the battle between the missionaries and the familiars.

“Those fool familiars of Yggdra’s! They call that fighting? What are they, animals?!” he spat, then turned and began climbing down from the observation platform. “If I can get close, bring down the organist—”

“U-Um, Lord Lansdowne…”

“You do what you can do, woman! What only you can do!” And with that, Arlen was gone from the platform, running with his sword in his hand toward where Ulrike and the others fought. Perhaps he felt that if Berta couldn’t kill the organist, he would do it himself. Arlen was, of course, a knight of the Missionary Order. Chances were good the other side would think he was a friend and wouldn’t attack him.

But what would the missionaries think of Arlen, carving a path past Ulrike and the familiars directly toward the man at the organ? Would Ulrike and her companions even recognize Arlen as an ally? It might be very difficult for the young man to reach his objective.

“But…”

Feeling she had no options, Berta picked up Derrringer and looked through the scope. She could see the missionaries, beyond the statue of the guardian saint. She could see the man playing the organ, too. But the massive statue out front sometimes blocked her line of fire.

“I…”

Would she do it? Could she do it? She felt her stomach knot tighter as she asked herself these questions.

In front of her, Ulrike and the other familiars were fighting for all they were worth.

Ulrike had said they had to fight, lest their own town of Rostruch find itself in danger. Lest Yukinari be killed. Veronika had said that sitting and waiting sometimes just made a situation worse. She had been talking about the relationship between Yukinari and Dasa, but it was just as true of what was unfolding before Berta’s eyes.

She might be scared, yet in silently waiting for the problem to fix itself, she might find herself in a situation she regretted far more. There came a moment when she had to do something by her own hand, whether she wanted to or not.

Logically, Berta understood that. But she was scared.

But...

You do what you can do, woman! What only you can do!

Those had been Arlen's words. He had been her enemy once, but he had said those words and then gone to do what he felt only he could do. Berta didn't know what had caused this change of heart. But...

"What... only I... can do..."

This was the first job Yukinari had ever given her. The first object, Derrringer, he had ever given her. And the first expectations anyone had ever had of her.

Ever since she had been offered up as a living sacrifice, ever since she had been assigned to serve as a shrine maiden, she hadn't once been able to be of real use. She didn't feel that doing menial chores was really being of use to such an exalted entity as a god. And if she had no other way of serving her lord, she was prepared to give herself to him as a woman—but then he never laid a finger on her.

The profound concern Yukinari had shown for this town while Berta fretted about how to be helpful was truly worthy of being called the glory of a god. It meant so much. Her "little sisters" at the orphanage would most likely be able to go without starving—even though they were no longer to be living sacrifices. They would be able to live their lives—be it tomorrow or in the far future—without fear.

Berta profoundly respected Yukinari. She wanted to repay him, even if it wasn't much. That was why she had offered herself up: her body, her spirit, her life, everything she was.

This was what brought Berta to realize that she had been thinking only of herself. Because *she* was afraid, because *she* didn't want to hurt other people, because *she* wasn't confident in herself, she thought she couldn't do it.

Even though she had sworn to give herself to Yukinari. She just needed to give these feelings of fear to him as well. If she felt she would lose something in doing so, that was itself proof of her sacrifice to him.

Without a word, Berta looked down the scope once more. She was still afraid; she fought to keep herself from crumbling. She inhaled deeply, trying to calm her breathing.

But then she swallowed heavily. Through the scope, she could see that the statue was getting closer to the town; it blocked her field of view more frequently now. This made things worse—while Berta had been arguing with herself, the difficulty of the shot had gone up exponentially.

I knew it, Berta thought, ashamed. I knew I was a worthless little girl.

But just as she was thinking this—

"You shall not pass!" Ulrike bellowed. There followed a *boom*.

To Berta's shock, the statue disappeared from the scope. Without really thinking about it, she closed her right eye, which had been looking through the scope, and opened her left. She found the statue tilting crazily. She thought it must have been the effect of an "anti-guardian-saint-statue trap" that Yukinari and Dasa had set up, as the god had explained to her ahead of time. In simple terms, it was a shallow hole that the statue could fall into. In order to prevent Ulrike and the other familiars from falling into it, there was a "lid" on it. The boom must have been them removing the lid.

Quickly, Berta looked back through the scope. She could see him—she could see the man playing the organ.

Now she could hit him. She was sure of it. Just where she wanted.

She stopped breathing. She stopped feeling.

And then she pulled the trigger.

Boom.

The bullet reached its target in an instant; in the scope's narrow field of view, Berta could see red blossom on the organist's shoulder, and he tumbled from his chair. The bullet then passed through the organist and struck his instrument: Berta saw a bullet hole appear in the frame, cracks spidering away from it.

With a *wumph*, the statue of the guardian saint stopped moving.

The other knights near the driver's seat hurriedly tried to reach the organ, but...

Boom.

The second bullet was a direct hit on the organ. White keys flew up into the air.

Panic began to run through the missionaries. "The statue! The statue of the guardian saint—!"

The missionaries were put on the back foot, but the familiars were inspired. An instant later, they attacked.

●

Once he assumed his angel form, Yukinari could use all the power that was within him. But the situation wasn't so easy that he could simply walk away with the victory. He had tried to bluff the female knight, but chances were she'd seen through it.

"Now, what to do, what to do...?" Yukinari muttered behind his mask.

The angels had been created by the True Church of Harris in order to perform miracles to promote conversion; they hadn't been intended for battle. The reason Yukinari could fight so effectively was because he

consciously used the angels' power of physical reconstitution. Though its true offensive power came not from physical reconstitution itself, but from the weapons he produced with it.

And most of those weapons—whether the .44 Magnum bullets of Durandall or the rifle rounds of Derrringer—simply weren't able to pierce the thick armor of the statue of the guardian saint.

If Yukinari could touch the statue, he could break it down with physical reconstitution no matter how thick its armor was, but because of its ability to spew flames, he couldn't get too close. The knights of the Missionary Order, for their part, were starting to recover from the shock of the incomprehensible weapon called a gun.

The Friedlanders were continuing their attacks with their Durandalls, but they had little practice with the weapons and even less hope of hitting moving targets; the missionaries had begun to realize that despite all the noise, casualties were relatively few.

Dasa, of course, was able to exert some control using Red Chili, with which she could accurately hit the missionaries' legs or shoulders, but she was just one person.

Above all, the enemy were trained, professional warriors. They had been taught how to suppress their fear. They took the shields from the fallen to double their own defenses and began closing in on Friedland's main gate.

This was more or less the way things had happened during the fight with Arlen's unit. Dasa's gun wasn't capable of punching through two shields at once. And once they knew they were protected, sheer numbers did the rest.

"Didn't you say this was going to be over soon?" the female knight who appeared to be leading them said triumphantly. "An angel you may be, but there's only one of you; the rest are a flock of sparrows. It was madness to think you could defeat me."

Yukinari didn't respond, even as he dodged the massive sword that came crashing down at him. Whatever the commander felt about this, she smiled like a cat playing with a mouse and said, "Blitz them! Destroy them in a single breath!"

The missionaries had been staying on the defensive, judging Yukinari's powers—but at the woman's orders, they instantly went on the offensive.

A knight's primary offensive tactic is the charge. Obviously, it works best from horseback, but they can also stab or trample the opponent to great effect. Faced with a brigade of knights executing their most cherished tactic, the Friedlanders began to panic.

Green soldiers had no hope of victory. It was one thing to fire Durandalls from a distance, but if it came to crossing swords, they would have no chance without years of experience. If things got too chaotic, it would also be difficult to keep Dasa safe. If she got caught up in melee combat, she wouldn't be much better off than the farmers.

Perhaps the best thing Yukinari could do would be to produce a giant cannon and use it to shoot the statue of the guardian saint, as he'd done

during the battle with Arlen's forces. But unlike that time, the enemy was bearing down on him now, and Yukinari was too busy for such ploys. He could have created a cannon in five seconds, but it was time he just couldn't find.

But then...

"Yargh!"

"T-The enemy is—hrgh?!"

The shouts came not from the front line of onrushing knights, but from the rear, where the female knight accompanied the huge wagon.

Yukinari squinted and looked in the direction of the noise. There he saw Veronika, laying waste with her halberd. When had she gotten there? Maybe she had moved in using the dust as cover when the statue fell into the hole.

"Yaaaaaaaaah!"

To attack a fully armored knight with a bladed weapon required finding the chinks in his defenses. But Veronika wasn't concerned with killing her enemies; she spun around, using the centrifugal force of the halberd's butt to slam into helmets and smack into knees. She clearly intended to confuse the enemy and buy her allies time. Then Yukinari, or perhaps the Friedlanders, might be able to come up with some way to change the situation.

Sweeping missionaries out of her way, Veronika closed in on the female knight.

To her surprise, though, when she stabbed at the woman's midriff, the knight pulled out her sword and deflected the thrust.

"Hrr!"

The move was stronger than she expected, and Veronika was thrown ever so slightly off balance. In contrast, the female knight was able to assume a better fighting stance as she jumped down from the driver's seat. With a mad smile, she shouted, "You underestimate me! I may be a young woman, but I'm commanding this army on merit!"

Veronika frowned and began to drop back. She wasn't going to insist on defeating the woman. Yes, she had entered the enemy formation of her own free will, but the situation was exceptionally dangerous. If the missionaries were able to collect themselves, Veronika would be completely surrounded, and that would mean the end for her.

"Hah!" Still smiling, the female knight struck out with her sword again and again.

Normally, in a battle of halberd versus sword, the person with the longer reach would have the advantage. But the knight's movements were nimble and quick, and she was deliberately getting close to Veronika, pushing her back. Most of her attacks were stabs; she would move just enough to avoid the mercenary's ripostes and then resume her attack with vigor.

Veronika was unmistakably hard-pressed. Her wounds had only just healed, and her strength wasn't completely recovered yet. The fact that she

had been able to go toe-to-toe with the missionaries all this time was amazing, proof that she was a genius soldier. But even so—

"You decided to fight me when this was the best you could do?" the female knight crowed.

For each attack Veronika meted out, two came back. The woman had obviously been telling the truth when she said she had earned her position. She understood exactly the difference between her weapon and her opponent's, and had chosen the best tactics to deal with it. She deflected the halberd, causing Veronika to drop it. Sensing an opportunity, she closed in, stabbed at Veronika—

But to the woman's surprise, Veronika met the blow. In her hand, which had held her spear just seconds ago, there was a sword.

She hadn't been forced to drop her halberd after all. She just wanted it to look like she had so she could switch weapons. Her opponent had been so confident that Veronika was unarmed; now, her attack hesitated. In that instant, Veronika closed distance and began a sword battle.

Nonetheless, the female knight continued to mock her enemy. "You are a fool!" she exclaimed as she met Veronika's challenge. Now blade met blade in shower after shower of sparks. "You couldn't win with a halberd—but you think you can beat me with a sword?"

It was true, Veronika was in trouble. Her weakened body could summon the strength for a stab, but lacked endurance. She was being put more and more on the defensive.

"This—is the end!" The female knight brought her blade down from above. Veronika caught the blow with her sword; the two weapons locked against each other. In this position, however, Veronika, with less physical strength, was at a disadvantage. The female knight must have known that as well, for she pressed her attack with a triumphant expression on her face.

And then—

Boom.

The woman's body shuddered with the sudden, tremendous violence of the sound. Veronika's sword was not just a sword. It was a Durandall. Obviously, she hadn't been able to aim, so the bullet just flew off in a random direction. But the knight was clearly shaken by the sound of a .44 Magnum bullet being fired right next to her head. Or perhaps the noise had done something to her semicircular canals, so necessary to humans for maintaining their sense of equilibrium.

Veronika seized the opening.

"Yaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!"

She spun, throwing her momentum into the slash. She was looking for the woman's neck, but a hastily raised sword blocked the blow. But from

her unbalanced position, she couldn’t fully resist the force of Veronika’s attack. The knight pitched forward where she stood.

“Hrrgh?!”

The sole of Veronika’s shoe caught the woman in the solar plexus. With the knight unconscious at her feet, Veronika stared at the men of the Missionary Order all around. They had been attempting to encircle her, but now they stopped. So did those attacking Yukinari, and so did the organist on the wagon.

“…Thanks,” Yukinari grunted, and then he stepped back, planting his right fist in his left palm.

He had made this thing before. The blueprints were in his mind, and the basic construction was blindingly simple. He would make no mistakes.

A good, sturdy cylinder with powder and ammunition inside, and a detonator on one end. All he had to do was give it a good thump, and the round would come flying out—a disposable cannon.

This time, though, he changed it a little bit—or rather, he added something. Specifically...

"...Hrrrraaaaahhh!"

...he turned it into a massive tonfa, two meters long and fifty centimeters in diameter. It was basically a huge stick with a handle on one side.

Grasping the handle that grew from the side, Yukinari struck the statue of the guardian saint a mighty blow, causing it to bend backward and reveal a chink in its chest armor. Yukinari shoved the cannon into the opening; the point-blank range ensured that there was no need to worry about the shot going wide.

As soon as he had gotten the cannon in as far as it would go, the part attached to the back of the weapon was pushed forward by momentum, striking the detonator. A blast far greater than any gunshot erupted, and the cannonball flew straight into the statue's heart.

A reddish-black fluid spewed out of the statue, which went stiff as if it were a living thing. An instant later, the Missionary Order's ultimate weapon fell to the ground with a dull thud.

The missionary knights were in a state of shock. They had lost their commander and now their statue, and they began to fall back. They could fight to the death, but it would probably be in vain. These were people who could, when necessary, suppress their instinctive fear of death—but that was precisely why they wanted to avoid a situation that could only lead to their meaningless demise.

Then, a shout came from the direction of town.

"Leave now!"

The missionaries looked to see what the commotion was. To everyone's surprise, it was Arlen who came sprinting through the gate. He had his hands cupped around his mouth and was shouting at the top of his lungs. "The other statue has been destroyed, and its unit has retreated! If you don't want to be pointlessly annihilated here, then go! Run!"

The knights looked at each other as if to confirm that they were all of the same mind. Then someone shouted, "R-Retreat!" And the missionaries receded like an ebbing tide.

●

The Missionary Order of the True Church of Harris withdrew. The wounded were carried on horses or loaded on the huge wagon, whose original cargo was now gone. Those who were unhurt took the rearguard, watching for any pursuit from the Friedlanders.

Not that the villagers had any intention of such a thing. The wise choice might have been to destroy the entire unit, so as not to leave any unfinished business, but they simply didn't have the luxury—or so Yukinari felt. There were casualties on the Friedland side as well, though they were relatively few. And—

"Wh-Why do you not… kill me…?" a voice groaned from Veronika's feet. It was the female knight who had been commanding the enemy forces. Presumably this was the Angela Jindel Arlen had spoken of. Veronika still had a boot planted firmly on Angela's stomach.

Yukinari, too, turned a questioning gaze on Veronika. Truth be told, he was surprised Veronika hadn't finished Angela. Veronika was a mercenary, a professional. War was her business. Unlike Berta, she couldn't be expected to hesitate to kill an enemy. She had, in fact, killed several of the missionaries in this very battle. And yet...

"Excellent question. Perhaps I should," Veronika murmured as if the thought were just now occurring to her. She watched the missionary unit disappear down the road. "But I have nothing to gain from killing you here. Or is that just an excuse, too? Maybe a bit of the local deity's obsession with pacifism has rubbed off on me."

"Obsession with… pacifism…?" Angela frowned, surprised by the words.

Veronika sighed, then finally looked at Angela. "If that doesn't make sense to you," she said, "then let's say it's in order to help my friends whom you hold captive. You can be my hostage. But since the people around here are, according to you, savages and barbarians, I wouldn't expect the best of treatment from them if I were you." She sounded almost sad.

Epilogue: The Changing God

By the time the cleanup from the battle was over, the sun was deep into twilight.

There was an almost miraculously small number of casualties on the Friedland side, but by the time they had brought in all the missionaries who had been left wounded on the battlefield, and broken down the statues of the guardian saint and left them by the roadside, more than half a day had passed.

Afterward, Yukinari appointed a minimal number of guards to keep watch around the town, and then he and the others gathered in the Schillings mansion. In the reception room, they discussed the battle and considered what to do next.

“First of all, everyone, thank you for your help.” Fiona looked around the room. “As a representative of this town, I want to offer my deepest gratitude for how you fought.”

Besides Fiona, Yukinari, Dasa, Berta, Ulrike, Veronika, and even Arlen were in the reception room. Each of them was sinking into the room’s sofas, awash in the fatigue of surviving a battle. Fiona had personally brought them all something to drink and offered them words of appreciation.

The imprint of an open-handed slap was still visible on Arlen’s left cheek; this was provided by Fiona. Although he had ultimately turned out to be Friedland’s ally, breaking out of jail in contravention of the town’s decision was not something to be praised. The slap was the price he paid for his disobedience, but it was in its own way also a sign of Fiona’s goodwill.

“I feel like we got through by the skin of our teeth,” Yukinari said. All of the wounded, including the townspeople and the captured Angela, were being tended to by the doctor. Again, by some miracle, there were no deaths on the Friedland side, but no one believed it would go as easily the next time.

This time, the missionaries’ intention had been to attempt conversion again in a town where it had failed the first time. In other words, regardless of what they might do to the erdgod, Yukinari, or the mercenary they’d been pursuing, Veronika, they hadn’t come intending to kill the villagers. That was their miscalculation. Now, however, with missionaries wounded and even dead at the hands of the Friedlanders, any further war against the city could be expected to be total.

“I think we can expect another attack by the True Church of Harris,” Veronika said dispiritedly. “It’s probably safe to assume the knights who ran away will report that this town has resisted conversion.”

Obviously, not every town and village in the world had yet been converted by the True Church of Harris. The further you went into the frontier, the more the authority of the Church waned. It was perfectly natural.

Yet Veronika had never, she said, heard tell of a town the Church had tried and failed to convert. As a mercenary, she had traveled all over the map, and she was probably right. Which meant that the True Church of Harris was likely to come against Friedland with all the terrible force they could muster.

"Lord Yukinari…" The anxious voice came from Berta. In today's battle, Yukinari had entrusted the rear of the town to her and Ulrike—and Berta was somewhat worried about the fact that the experience of real battle didn't seem to have changed her personality at all. Or really, rather than changing, she was worried about being broken. Some people never recover from the shock of killing their first person—Veronika had told her so.

But it seemed that in Berta's case, at least, such worry was for nothing. She was still the retiring type. From another perspective, she had done well to fight on despite her personality. Perhaps the fact that she had stopped short of taking the organist's life had something to do with it. He was badly wounded, certainly, but not mortally.

"I guess it's possible we could make a move to attack their base in Aldreil first," Yukinari said. Even as he spoke, the possibility didn't quite seem real. He just couldn't picture them striking Aldreil. He didn't fight because he wanted to. He had never considered a preemptive attack before.

"Yuki…" Beside him, Dasa took his hand. It wasn't that she was worried about the prospect of battle; she was bothered to hear Yukinari speak of attacking of his own volition for the first time. She knew Yukinari well. She was trying to keep him from hurting himself.

"It's all right," he said. He squeezed her hand and smiled at her.

It was something he had known all along, even though he had chosen to ignore it until this moment. If he had power, then what he wanted or didn't want was irrelevant. He might not have any ambitions of conquest, but that didn't mean those around him would leave him alone. Keeping Friedland safe would demand more than just dealing with what was right in front of him. Merely repulsing his enemies each time they attacked would inevitably lead to destruction.

If all this had concerned only himself alone, that might have been one thing, but now what happened and how he reacted would affect the lives and fate of an entire town. He would have to make sure he looked ahead, kept the initiative.

Aldreil was part of that. He had no idea how the Missionary Order was running the town, but he did know Veronika's companions were still captive there. He might need to send someone there to gather intelligence. He might also need to interrogate Angela and the other captured knights.

Regardless…

"I can see I was being naïve," he said, looking around at everyone. "But we can't go back now. Whatever happens next, there's a good chance it will involve the people of Friedland. That some of them might die. I've never

asked for living sacrifices, but this makes things no better than under the previous erdgod. It may make them worse."

Fiona raised a hand, saying, "Yukinari, that's—"

But Yukinari cut her off. "I know. What I'm saying is, we can't be shortsighted. If we only think about the wounded right in front of us, the dead, then we might fail to prevent even worse tragedies in the future. So we have to be ready—ready to shed blood today so we don't have to shed blood tomorrow." He turned to Arlen. "And Arlen. You really saved our necks this time. Without you, that other statue might have reached the town. I'm sure it was hard to fight other missionary knights, but you still did it. Thank you. Really."

Yukinari bowed his head. Arlen, just for an instant, froze wide-eyed.

"H-Hmph. So you've finally realized how strong I am." His words didn't quite seem to fit the occasion. He turned away. Yukinari could tell Arlen was embarrassed, and as all he wanted was to give credit where credit was due, he didn't press the point.

"Berta, thank you, too. I really put you through the wringer…"

"N-No, my Lord!" She shook her head hurriedly. Feeling the room's collective gaze on her, she shrunk into herself—but slowly, almost reluctantly, a shy smile spread across her face. "Not… Not at all. I… I was finally able to be of use to you, Lord Yukinari. It was scary, but… I'm glad I did it. Happy." Her head got lower and her voice got smaller as she spoke.

"Berta," Veronika said. That was all, but it seemed to spark some realization in the girl, who suddenly blinked a couple of times, then grabbed the hem of her dress with both hands in what seemed to be a gesture of resolve.

"For you, Lord Yukinari, I'll push myself. For you, I can do anything."

"Uh—r-right, thank you," Yukinari nodded, overawed by an expression he had never seen from Berta before. It left him a bit jumpy, as though she had confessed that she loved him. Dasa was watching the entire exchange from behind her glasses with a dark look. But never mind that.

"I've decided to fight," Yukinari said seriously. "I hate to make people like Berta do the things fighting involves, and I don't want to force Arlen to confront his old comrades. I don't want Dasa to have to strain herself, and I don't want to worry Fiona. Honestly, I would have preferred to avoid this if there were any possible way." Yukinari took a deep breath and looked around. "But it's time to put aside childish things. That's why I'm asking—no, begging—for your help."

"Who's begging?" Fiona said, looking at the imploring Yukinari with a smirk. "You're our god. You ought to have a little more confidence telling us what to do."

"…Right."

Everyone in the room looked at him. Yukinari scratched his cheek and smiled with embarrassment.

●

They received a report from the Missionary Order on the frontier, sent with the utmost urgency. It wasn't brought by a messenger bird, but by a light-armored knight traveling as quickly as he could on horseback—something important enough for him to risk attack by demigods or xenobeasts along the way to deliver. The head of the Missionary Order, Walt Dickson, immediately sought an audience with the Dominus Doctrinae.

Walt ordered the exhausted knight to change into more presentable clothing, and then the two headed to the Great Cathedral to see Justin Chambers. There...

"...Your Holiness?" Walt frowned, stopping in place.

Justin looked exactly as he always had, and the interior of the Great Cathedral hadn't changed, either. But there was something else there, something Walt hadn't seen before.

"Father?"

The speaker was a young girl. Fifteen or sixteen years old, perhaps. Short, even a bit of baby fat here and there. And she was standing right next to Justin's chair.

She had shoulder-length silver hair and crimson eyes, along with glasses—a vision aid that was catching on in the capital. It all gave her a distinctive appearance.

"Who are these people?"

She pointed at Walt, who found himself at a loss. Who was this girl, exactly? Justin Chambers wasn't supposed to be married. There were rumors that he was involved with some alchemist woman—but even if that had been true, and even if their union had produced a child, he would never have had the audacity to have her attend him in the Church's central cathedral.

"Captain," the knight asked with a look of bafflement. "What in the world...?"

"Curiosity can kill more than just the cat," Walt told him, pushing aside his own questions. There were some things he didn't need to think about. He just had to do his duty.

"Captain Dickson," Justin said. "I hear we have an urgent message." He completely ignored the child's question, as if to say that the girl calling him "father" didn't exist.

"Yes, Your Holiness," Walt said, falling to one knee. "I've come with the report." The knight accompanying him imitated his gesture. "As a matter of fact, two of the civilizing expedition units stationed in Aldreil, the Ninth Brigade and the Seventh Brigade, have sent a message that's difficult to believe. Shockingly, they report that we've lost two of our guardian saint statues."

"The statues...?" Justin narrowed his eyes ever so slightly. Perhaps he was surprised, and it was no wonder. To lose two statues at a single stroke should not have been possible. They were the Church's ultimate weapons,

capable of felling an erdgod. A successful attack on even one of them would require a hundred soldiers, and half of them would die in the attempt.

“What was the cause?” Justin asked.

“It was—Go on, tell His Holiness.” Walt gestured to the missionary beside him. The man bowed his head once more, then began to explain about the place where the problem had occurred—a frontier village called Friedland.

He told how this town had been reported as successfully converted by the Sixth Missionary Brigade, but how it now appeared that the Sixth Brigade’s guardian saint statue had also been destroyed. He spoke of how Friedland seemed to be turning into a center of anti-Church sentiment, and he told how there was someone there who was venerated as a god. Most importantly, he said…

“Eyewitnesses to the battle claim that the ‘Blasphemer of Blue Steel’ was there…!”

The words sent a shock of anxiety through Walt. The Church considered that name taboo, and although a handful of people above a certain station did know about it, simply mentioning the Blasphemer could get you into serious trouble.

Walt thought this might provoke displeasure, or anger, from Justin. The current Dominus could not be happy to suddenly hear the name of the Bluesteel Blasphemer. But…

“Is that so? Is that so indeed?”

Justin didn’t shout or snarl, but a thin smile twisted his lips.

“Your Holiness—”

“So that’s where he’s been hiding…” Justin nodded eagerly, then looked at the girl beside him.

“Father…?” The unidentified child cocked her head. It almost seemed she didn’t understand the meaning of the conversation she’d just heard.

“Be joyful,” Justin said in a gentle tone. “It seems the day has come for you to fulfill the reason for your existence.”

Afterword

Heyo, light novel author Sakaki here.

Today, I present you with *Bluesteel Blasphemer* Volume 3.

On this occasion, I want to give my profound thanks first to my readers, as well as my editing team and my illustrator, Tera Akai.

As I've been saying since the Afterword of the first book, the concept for *Bluesteel Blasphemer* was an "other world cheat-harem" story with guns. When I actually wrote it, though, the "harem" part turned out a little thin, or rather, there was a noticeable difference in how real Dasa felt versus how real the other girls felt. Especially Berta. Once Ulrike showed up, I found that as an author the familiar was easier to handle, and Berta kind of got left by the wayside, the poor girl.

In a comedy, there are a number of different ways to add realism to your characters, but there aren't too many funny scenes in this story. So the upshot is, I decided to focus on Berta this time around.

Rest assured, this doesn't mean I've forgotten about the harem proper. Not at all. Last time, I added a "loli"-type sub-heroine, so this time I added a couple of sub-heroines from the "older sister" archetype. And one of them is an enemy! So after the battle they can ABC and XYZ and finally EFG...!! ...Or maybe not. Anyway, it can only be good to have more girls in the cast, right?

Veronika kind of got shoved into the background on the cover, but anyway, I was shooting to write her like a character out of *Record of Lodoss War*. You know, she's a mercenary, but secretly of noble heritage... eh. That's why she has red hair.

As for Angela, she was actually planned to show up in Volume 1, but I ended up having more material than I expected in that book, so she was omitted. She ended up not seeing the light of day until here in Volume 3. Originally she was just going to be a sisterly character, but by the time we were laying out Volume 3, we had turned her into a vice-captain of the Missionary Order, so she's not quite the character I initially imagined.

And then, although I don't think she's pictured anywhere in the book, *that* person finally shows up. Ah, to fight one's own kin! (*eyes sparkle*)

Anyway, this volume also focuses on Berta, so you get a lot of these older-sister types. It had been my plan all along to include characters like

that, so from an authorial perspective I kind of feel like, *Ah, I finally managed it*. The story being what it is, though, they can't all be flirtatious.

From the standpoint of series structure, we've hit a major turning point. What is it? Well, stay tuned. Truth be told, we're coming to something I actually haven't written too much about, so I'm a little bit nervous.

But don't worry about me. All I want is for my readers to enjoy themselves.

Okay, then! See you next volume.

Ichiro Sakaki
2015/12/8

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Bluesteel Blasphemer Volume 3
by Ichirou Sakaki
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Edited by Sasha McGlynn

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